

Mothers and Mothering throughout the Life Course

Spring / Fall 2025

Vol. 16



JoAnna Boudreaux, Kate Golding, Jennifer M. Heisler, Crystal Machado,
Sheila Martel, Ariel Moy, Usoa García Sagüés, Emily Wolfinger,
Diana Aramburu, Rachael Boulton, Marcella Gemelli, Katherine Herrán-Magee,
Mariana Trujillo Marquez, Elisabeth Hanscombe, and more



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Mothers and Mothering throughout the Life Course

Rage, Grief, and Ambivalence towards My Mother's Death: An Inheritance of Refusal

This autoethnographic essay confronts the entangled legacies of silence, violence, ambivalence, and estrangement between a mother and daughter. Written two years after the death of the author's mother, it explores how cycles of cruelty, denial, and emotional absence shape identity, caregiving, and grief. Rather than offering a narrative of healing or reconciliation, the essay articulates "the inheritance of refusal"—a deliberate act of boundary setting, withdrawal, and nonparticipation in expected familial roles. Through narrative and theoretical reflection, the author critiques the cultural and familial expectations of daughterhood, especially for daughters who are never allowed to be children, who are expected to submit in the name of duty or redemption. Refusal, in this context, becomes an embodied survival strategy of reclaiming dignity through noncompliance. Drawing on theorists like Saidiya Hartman and Sara Ahmed, the essay positions refusal as both a personal ethic and a political stance. Ultimately, the author aims to give voice to those who grieve incoherently and survive complex maternal legacies with no decipherable cultural script. It speaks especially to those who were never protected, who learned to nurture themselves through withdrawal, and who are still learning what it means to forgive—or not.

Death

"JoAnna! Come and get me! Come and get me! JoAnna! JoAnna! JoAnna!"

I was not there when my mother died. The day before, I drove to Little Rock to see my daughter, leaving both Memphis and my mother behind. My brother told me it was okay to go. He and his wife had taken over her care: the lifting, the wiping, the feeding, the managing of her medications, and the catering to her every whim and demand. By then, she was too weak to physically assault us, but her words were as specific and cruel as ever. Her cruelty was part of her

personality. At just 4'11" and barely 120 pounds, she had always relied on cursing and screaming to compensate for her small frame.

She referred to my brother as a "broke bum" for leaving his job to care for her and accused his wife of being a "crackhead" trying to steal her jewelry. My mother refused to consider that my brother was helping her out of his loyalty to her, and my sister-in-law was helping her out of love for my brother.

But, of course, her cruellest words were reserved for me: her forsaken daughter. She was furious that I would not remain constantly by her side to submit to her abuse. She blamed my husband. She accused me of being controlled, pitiful, weak, and stupid.

Yet whenever I sat with her—almost always intending to give my brother and his wife some reprieve—there was nothing about me that was off-limits. The shape of my body, the size of my nose, my clothes, and my life choices were all targets for mockery. For example, she could never comprehend why I was still in school, pursuing a postdoc after earning a PhD. "You must be really stupid," she sneered, "Can't get a real job. Still in school?"

This was the reason my brother encouraged me to leave. He said it hurt him to witness it. He had already confessed how much guilt and shame he carried from our childhood as he came to reflect on how differently we had been treated. He once said, "I keep searching my memory and searching my memory, and I can't come up with any reason why—why was I told not to talk to you? To stay away from you? What did you do? I keep trying to remember but... we was kids. There is nothing you could have done."

Still, I should have been there—at least for him. Like he said, "We was kids"; it was not his fault.

We all knew she was dying, but we did not know when. She had already spent two months in the hospital, admitted once again for heart failure. When the doctors suggested hospice, she initially refused. They sent her to a rehab facility, but after just one day, the facility called, saying she had been so abusive to the staff that they could not keep her. She had thrown a full cup of Sprite (with ice) at a nurse. The hospital took her back but made it immediately clear: If we did not come to get her, they would discharge her into the street. On the way there, my brother, my sister-in-law, and I joked about letting them. It was gallows humour, of course. We would not have really done that.

But by that point, we were all exhausted: my brother, his wife, the hospital staff, and the rehab nurses. Finally, it was determined that she was no longer fit to make her own medical decisions. We worked with her primary care doctor to transfer her care to a home hospice team. They delivered a bed to my brother's house, and for the final ten days of her life, that is where she would stay. I am certain that if you asked my mother, she would tell you that we killed her. This is why she had resisted hospice so fiercely to begin with. Hospice meant that she was dying, and she had decided not to die. By

overriding her decision, we had decided that she was.

As I consider this now, maybe she had a right to be so pissed.

On her last night of life, I remained on the phone with my brother. She had not let him sleep. She thrashed around. She ripped off her clothes, clawed at the bedrails, and tried to throw herself over the side. By that time, her body was so swollen with fluid that she had become impossible for my brother to lift. I consistently contemplated whether I should make the three-hour drive back to Memphis. "What would you do if you were here, Jo? There is nothing you can really do."

Of course, we did not know that night was the last. She had been dying for months, and she had similar episodes before. But that night, she was screaming for me to come and get her. This is the reason my brother called me. He wanted me to hear it. Her screaming was surreal and unsettling, like something not quite human. It was high-pitched, rageful, almost disembodied: "Come get me, JoAnna! JoAnna! Come and get me!" she shrieked my name over and over, howling it out, lengthening it, and stretching out the vowels. While my brother was on the phone with me, my sister-in-law was on the phone with the hospice care team. They were told to drop my mother's bed to the lowest level, raise the rails, and give her a certain dose of morphine. Hours later, they would be told to give her more morphine. She screamed "JoAnna" three times until she abruptly fell asleep. By this time, it was around 4:00 a.m. She would be pronounced dead at 10:38 a.m. later that day.

Refusal

"I'm not doing this today."

I was not my mother's primary caregiver. My sister-in-law was. I did not bathe my mother, did not lift her swollen limbs, and did not wipe the fluids that seeped from her splitting skin. I visited. I brought food. I sat with her when I could tolerate it. And then I left.

One day, when I arrived, she accused me of stealing money from her bank account—money I had been using to pay her bills with my brother's permission. Just the fact that I had access to her account was enough for her to believe I was looting it. That day, I was quick to gather my things and walk out the door that I had just walked in. "I'm not doing this today."

This is what I inherited from my mother: refusal.

She had refused to be my mother, so I refused to be her daughter. It was her cruelty that had trained me to leave. She had refused the script of motherhood. She was never nurturing, never loving. My earliest memories are of sharp slaps, burning scratches on my face, and a consistently tender scalp from where she would yank my hair. As a little child, she would point out how flat-chested I was, how I had no hips, and how I lacked any attributes that might attract a

man. It was cruelty that taught me how to withdraw, how to leave both physically and emotionally. In turn, I learned to refuse the expectations of daughterhood.

The “inheritance of refusal” represents a concept born from the emotional and relational dynamics between my mother and me. Our relationship was shaped by years of neglect, cruelty, and emotional manipulation. In this context, refusal becomes a learned survival mechanism. It was my way to reclaim autonomy in a relationship marked by powerlessness and toxic dependency.

In this way, refusal is both a personal and relational theory, offering insight into how traumatic family dynamics can influence future generations’ approaches to caregiving and emotional responsibility. It is not characterized by mere physical absence; it is an emotional withdrawal. As a child, I buried myself in books, journals, daydreams, and fantasies. Refusing to be mentally or emotionally present becomes a form of self-preservation. This inheritance shaped my approach to her in the final days of her life. Even when I was there, I was not.

This writing is, in part, an act of sense-making. I draw on autoethnography as a methodological approach that allows for the self to be used as a site of inquiry (Ellis). I aim to consider how inherited trauma and generational silence leave their imprint on a life. This work also engages trauma studies, particularly theories that recognize trauma as fragmented, nonlinear, and often transmitted intergenerationally (Caruth). In that sense, what I recount here is my record of affective survival.

Refusal is not always an act of rebellion. Sometimes, it is the only language available when all others have failed. In her work, Saidiya Hartman traces how young Black women navigated life on the margins of respectability, often making choices that defied societal norms. These choices were radical expressions of autonomy and survival.

I have come to understand my refusal through this lens. It was not resistance for its own sake but a necessary disengagement from a performance that demanded my silence, sacrifice, and self-erasure. I would not give myself over to a woman who had regarded me with contempt. I would not sacrifice myself at the altar of daughterhood, especially when the role I was cast in never included love. My refusal became my ethic: a willful stance, not just a reaction.

Sara Ahmed theorizes “willfulness” as the act of refusing to go along with what is expected or demanded within family systems, especially those prioritizing obedience and docility. The willful subject is cast as a problem or a troublemaker because she willfully refuses the role assigned to her. She is scripted as irrational, disobedient, and difficult. Ahmed argues that to be willful is to be inconvenient to power. Ahmed holds that in family systems, willfulness is often gendered and pathologized. I recall how my father would often compare me to my mother whenever I displayed any anger or defensive-

ness. He would shake his head and chuckle: "You're just like your mother, Jo. Just like her! You both got a temper!"

From my father's perspective, my willfulness was not understood as an expression of grief or pain. It was an irrational act of temperament. I was just like my mother.

Her

"Growing up, I thought your mom was the most beautiful woman in the world."

My mother was born in 1950 in Pattaya, Thailand. Beyond that, all I know about her is a patchwork of stories. She would not speak about her childhood, her parents, her siblings, or the life she had before she came to the United States (US). When asked, she would snap, "It's none of your business." If pressed further, she would say, "I forgot."

Yet there were a handful of stories she told repeatedly. There was the one about the Chinese boy whose family owned a candy store. She hated that boy for a reason that was never fully explained. She spent an entire day sharpening pencils, tying them together, and then climbed into a tree to wait. When he passed by after school, she leapt from the branches and stabbed him in the neck. She told this story with a smirk and a sense of righteous pride.

She would also speak with intensity about her fear and hatred of monkeys. She claimed they threw coconuts at her on her way to school. They stole her pet pig. Then there was the story about the frogs. She described being held down by other children while they covered her body in frogs. She screamed until she peed on herself. She never said who did it or why. Just that it happened, and she hated frogs.

The rest of her memories may have been in the journals she kept. She would write in them daily using the flowery script of the Thai alphabet, which I never learned to read. Her writing was beautiful and indecipherable. I would stare at the letters like treasured secrets. She never offered to translate, and I would never dare to ask. At some point, the journals disappeared. I do not know where they went. Perhaps she destroyed them. They were the closest thing to her interior life, and they were never meant for anyone but herself.

Most of what I know about her past comes from my father. He met her while stationed in Thailand during the Vietnam War. He told me she was selling soup to American soldiers outside the Air Force base. She was fifteen years old, and he was thirty. He described her as small and sweet, wearing "red bell-bottoms." She had sun-kissed caramel skin and long, thick waves of black hair that fell down her back. She had a little sister. My dad would describe that sister as clinging to his legs and kissing his feet the last day they were in Thailand, right before they left for the US. He said she was around twelve

years old and begged him to take her with them. He would only tell us this story out of earshot of my mother. Whenever she heard him speaking about the past, she would scream at him to “shut the fuck up!”

Her favourite subject seemed to be herself. She spoke proudly of her hair and even more proudly of her skin, always commenting on its hairlessness, smoothness, and glow. In elementary school, the kids said she looked like Marilyn McCoo from *Solid Gold*. Later, one of my childhood friends told me, “Growing up, I thought your mom was the most beautiful woman in the world.”

Yet for all her vainglorious boasting, I do not think my mother was truly convinced she was beautiful.

There were two places I most often saw my mother: sitting in front of the television and sitting in front of the vanity mirror in her bedroom. One delivered images of the world’s ideal beauty, and the other reflected her struggle to live up to them. She spent many hours smearing beauty creams on her face, oiling her hair, and plucking her eyebrows. I would watch her watch herself. She once noticed me and flatly said, “Men don’t like women like us. They like blondes. Tall. Blue eyes. Big breasts. We don’t look like that.”

She stated it as a well-known fact. This belief reflects the logic of “colonial mimicry,” a term Homi Bhabha uses to describe the ambivalent desire of the colonized to resemble the colonizer. They can only imitate to the point of mimicry. My mother’s use of beauty creams and meticulous grooming was a striving towards a beauty ideal she could never fully attain. No matter how attractive she was perceived to be, she was not a white woman.

She was deeply defensive when people mistook her for Black or biracial. “I’m Thai,” she would snap. “I’m Asian! I’m not Black!” The assumption was always received like an insult, although that was rarely the intention. I did not understand it then, but now I can see how the misrecognition touched on racialized stereotypes she could not escape. She simply did not match the narrow perceptions of what an Asian woman was supposed to look like, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, before the internet began to complicate the image.

Her hips were too full. Her skin was too dark. Her beauty was untranslatable.

David Eng and Shinhee Han’s concept of “racial melancholia” helps me understand her anguish more clearly now. They describe racial melancholia as the psychic pain that results from the pressure to assimilate into white culture while being perpetually excluded from it. For immigrants and their children, this melancholia often shows up in the sorrow of displacement and the impossible longing to be seen as desirable, acceptable, or normal. It is a form of grief.

The fact that strangers sometimes assumed she was Black interrupted the fragile proximity to whiteness that the model minority myth falsely promises to Asian Americans. Looking back, I see now her rejection of Blackness as rooted in a desperate attempt to navigate the brutal hierarchies of race in the US. The pressure to assert her Asianness was, in some ways, an attempt to assert her worth. She may have been mourning a version of herself she was not allowed to become.

Her struggle echoes what Kieu-Linh Caroline Valverde describes as a contested racial terrain of Asian American femininity: a terrain shaped by a long history of orientalist fantasies and racialized misogyny. Asian women are often caught between invisibility and hypervisibility. As Valverde notes, the meanings assigned to Asian female bodies are never neutral; they are always saturated with histories of war, empire, migration, and colonial desire.

My mother did not have the language for any of this. English was not her first language. She never had a Thai friend to talk to. She never had a family. She never had anyone. I do not know why.

But I know what loneliness feels like. Perhaps this is something else I inherited from her.

Me

“You know your mom is just jealous of you, right?”

Memories of my childhood are fragmented. There are many moments I simply cannot recall. My brother tells me a story about a time when our mother threw Chinese takeout at me. He describes how grains of rice and pieces of shrimp clung to my hair. I have no memory of this incident. Perhaps it is the result of trauma, or perhaps it is simply how the mind protects itself. Elizabeth Loftus, a prominent psychological researcher, has shown that traumatic memories can be suppressed, distorted, or even forgotten entirely as a coping mechanism.

Perhaps this, too, is something I inherited from my mother: a refusal to remember—a generational passing down of emotional distance and unspoken wounds. We learn not only to withhold but also to reject the parts of ourselves and our memories that are too painful to confront. The refusal makes us feel safer. It makes it easier to navigate a world that feels dangerous and untrustworthy.

But, of course, there are things I do remember. I remember belt buckles breaking my skin, being dragged by my hair, and fingernails digging into my flesh. I remember crying until I was dry heaving. I remember my father's voice trying to interrupt the violence, his soft southern drawl pleading, “C'mon, babe, stop. Leave her alone. Stop.” And for that moment, she would.

Still, maybe I am being unfair to her. Maybe I should also say that the closest she ever came to tenderness was after a beating, when she would call me into her room, her face streaked with tears, a menthol cigarette in one hand. "I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry."

And maybe she was sorry.

And maybe I am refusing to forgive her.

Maybe that, too, is part of the inheritance.

I was a pretty child. I knew this because of how people reacted to me. I was always picked up, fawned over, and given random free items. This behaviour would continue into young adulthood. I also credit my father for this awareness. He was often absent, lost somewhere between alcohol and the night terrors left over from Vietnam, but somehow, he always managed to convince me that I was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. He would look at me with complete awe and admiration, calling me "Princess," "Tiger," and "Snake Eyes." I remember how, during the Miss Universe pageants, he would watch the screen with a Marlboro hanging from his mouth, gesture towards me with absolute certainty, and say, "You're way prettier than her. You could win that when you grow up."

I was smart, too. I made the honour roll. I placed second in the school spelling bee. I was one of those overly polite children who sought validation from adults, always trying to be good, trying to be liked. And I was. Everyone liked me. They told me I was bright. Charismatic. Special. Everyone except my mother.

She criticized everything. My thin hair. My supposedly wide nose. My feet would eventually grow to size seven, perfectly average. However, it was monstrous compared to her tiny size five: "Look at my feet and look at yours. You have feet like a man."

And unlike her, I had body hair. A faint mustache formed on my upper lip as I got older, and she never missed the chance to point it out. According to her, no one would want me. No one would ever desire a girl like me. "Look at you...no ass, no titties. Mustache like your dad. You gonna be bald like your dad, too. Look at my hair and look at yours."

For my mother, a woman's worth was directly tied to male attention. And I received plenty. Despite what she said, boys did want me. Men did, too. Constantly. Harassingly. Violently. I was victimized from a young age, and as I grew older, the attention only became more confusing, more dangerous.

I also began standing up to her. I stopped letting her hit me. I refused to undress at her demand. I would snatch the belt from her hands. I screamed back. I blocked her attempts to claw at my face. I ran away. Once, she called the police on me. An officer separated us and pulled me aside. "You know your mom is just jealous of you, right?" he said. "You're younger than her. Prettier than her. You speak English properly. You're an American."

I clung to his words as truth. He was the first person who offered any rationalization for what I was experiencing.

But that same officer would learn my school route. He would follow me home. He would circle back into my life in a different way.

And I blame my mother for that, too.

Life

“You keep trying to prove how great you are, but everyone already knows it.”

Since my mother died in 2023, I have avoided confronting any emotions I have about her absence. I do not really know if I feel anything at all. Yet... I must. Otherwise, why would I be writing this? Why would I have answered the call for this paper? Something in me needed to speak, even if I am unsure of what I want to say.

When I answered this call, I wanted to discuss how, at some point in my later adulthood, I gave up. I refused to keep trying to make amends, to find closure, and to make sense of my life. I originally built this essay around the theory I named “the inheritance of refusal.” I wanted to write about estrangement, about boundaries, and about when I intentionally decided, in later adulthood, to stop trying.

I have never dealt with my relationship with my mother. Not in any therapeutic, redemptive, or confessional sense. I just left. I moved on. I married at eighteen, after my mother threw all my clothes on the front porch. I had only known my husband for two months. He was thirty. Like her, I chose a man older than me—someone who, at the time, seemed to offer protection or maybe just escape. Maybe I am more like her than I want to admit. Maybe this, too, is part of the inheritance.

I must ask: What does it do to a person when the world tells you that you are smart and pretty, but your own mother does not? How does that kind of absence shape a person's hunger for validation?

I have been called a perfectionist in both my academic and personal life. Someone close to me said I carry hubris—a kind of excessive pride or self-confidence, the kind that offends the gods. But I do not feel excessive. I feel like someone who has spent her life doing too much just to prove she was barely enough.

I did not go to college until I was thirty-six. I married at eighteen and had five children by the time I was twenty-seven. Yet I do not regret that timeline. I am proud of my long marriage, of thirty-plus years with a man who has remained loyal and loving to me. I am proud of my beautiful children and of the life I built before I ever stepped into a college classroom. And I am proud of going to college when I was thirty-six years old. I earned scholarships, grants, and top paper awards. I graduated with a PhD at forty-eight.

Still, I have fretted and stressed over everything I did not win, everything I did not accomplish. As a student, my heart sank at every single point I lost in any assignment. I even scheduled a meeting with my English professor to ask why I had received a ninety-nine instead of a perfect score. Other students were devastated by failing grades, but I was obsessed with a single point. A friend, who was also a classmate, said to me: “You keep trying to prove how great you are, but everyone already knows it.”

Un-Conclusion

“I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry.”

I raised five beautiful and accomplished children. And while I was certainly not like my mother, I wonder if I ended up more like my father. I was never lost in alcohol, but I may have been lost in myself. I grew up alongside them. I played games with them, read to them, and spoiled them with toys and late-night snacks. But I often retreated into my world: books, journals, gaming, and quiet corners of fantasy I built for myself.

Many of the things I did for them, I realize now, I was also doing for me. The backyard menagerie of pets? That was my dream. Recklessly throwing paint on canvas? I wanted to do that. Smashing video game controllers to pummel my son in *Tekken Tag Team*? I enjoyed that. No mercy!

And there were five of them. It was chaos. I may have spent much of their childhoods retreating into myself, not being as emotionally present as a mother should be. Sometimes, I fear I passed on the same silences I inherited—the same self-doubt disguised as self-discipline, the same ache to be seen, buried beneath achievements and productivity.

But I know they know I love them. Perhaps excessively. I praise them. I celebrate them. I have intentionally tried to be what my mother was not.

Whenever I think about her, my mind always reverts to the image of her sitting in the dark with her menthol cigarette, saying, “I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry.”

Perhaps this is because it is the most sympathetic image I can think of.

Every other memory is marred by violence and insult.

And I do not know what I feel towards her: Rage? Grief? Ambivalence?

People say I am accomplished. I have a beautiful family. I am educated. I am well-liked. But I keep circling back to the same question: Why is it not enough?

Because, deep down, I am still angry.

I did not know this until I wrote this.

Why is a lifetime of accomplishments not enough to compensate for a little girl who just wanted her mother to like her?

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Not All Mothers Are Saints: Exploring Maternal Ambivalence in Indian Narratives

Motherhood in contemporary urban India is a deeply emotional and socially charged experience, often idealized in public discourse but rarely explored through the lens of maternal ambivalence. This article examines the lived experiences of twenty participants, including biological, adoptive, and single mothers living in Kolkata, ranging in age from twenty-eight to forty-six years, who reveal the complex interplay between personal emotions and societal expectations. Using in-depth semistructured interviews conducted between 2020 and 2025, the article highlights how mothers grapple with feelings of guilt, exhaustion, and contradiction—emotions often silenced in mainstream narratives of mothering. Despite having supportive families and spouses, participants reported experiencing immense social pressure to conform to traditional ideals of the perfect mother. The research draws from psychoanalytic theories, feminist thought, and sociological frameworks to contextualize these findings. Theories by Dennis Winnicott and Julia Kristeva help illuminate the psychological toll of mothering, while feminist scholars such as Nancy Chodorow, Arlie Russell Hochschild, and Kimberlé Crenshaw offer insight into the gendered emotional labour and intersecting identities shaping motherhood. The article also considers the influence of different regional Indian cinemas, as well as regional literature in reinforcing or challenging cultural myths of maternal perfection. The article argues that maternal ambivalence is not a weakness but a valid, even necessary, part of the mothering experience. It calls for a shift in public and academic discourse to acknowledge and honour these complex emotional realities, paving the way for a more empathetic and inclusive understanding of motherhood.

Introduction

Motherhood occupies a sanctified space in the Indian imagination. From myths to modern discourse, the mother is constructed as the epitome of selflessness, emotional abundance, and moral purity. Motherhood, while often romanticized as a universally fulfilling and instinctive role, is a profoundly complex psychological experience. Within Indian culture, this complexity is routinely masked by idealized narratives equating motherhood with moral virtue, emotional self-sacrifice, and divine femininity. The Indian mother—whether in mythology, cinema, or sociopolitical discourse—is imagined as an all-giving, all-forgiving entity whose identity is subsumed entirely into that of a caregiver. The image of the Indian mother has long been idealized, deified, and, in many ways, imprisoned by cultural expectations. While motherhood is undoubtedly a profound and intimate experience, this elevation of the maternal role leaves little room for mothers to express—or even experience—negative or conflicting emotions. It is in this space of emotional complexity that the concept of maternal ambivalence becomes necessary and radical.

From ancient mythology to contemporary media, the mother is cast as the epitome of selflessness, emotional abundance, and moral purity. While celebrated as a universally fulfilling and instinctive role, motherhood is, in reality, a deeply complex psychological experience. In Indian culture, this complexity is often obscured by idealized narratives equating mothering with moral virtue, emotional self-sacrifice, and divine femininity. Whether in myth, cinema, or sociopolitical discourse, the Indian mother is imagined as an all-giving and all-forgiving figure whose personal identity is subsumed entirely into caregiving. This cultural elevation, while reverent, also imprisons mothers within rigid moral expectations, leaving little space to articulate—or even acknowledge—negative or ambivalent feelings. This article argues that maternal ambivalence, far from being a sign of deficiency, is a natural and socially mediated aspect of motherhood, challenging the myth of the perfect mother. Drawing on qualitative interviews with mothers in Kolkata, it examines how women navigate this ambivalence through three interconnected domains: the changing role of familial support, the burden of social expectations and emotional guilt, and the tensions of intergenerational relationships. In doing so, it positions maternal ambivalence as not only psychologically valid but also culturally radical in the Indian context.

Maternal Ambivalence as Psychological Reality

From a psychological perspective, maternal ambivalence refers to the coexistence of love and resentment, affection and frustration, fulfilment and loss—emotions that are not only natural but inevitable in the experience of caregiving.

Object relations theory, particularly the work of Donald Winnicott, further nuances this understanding. Winnicott introduced the concept of the “good enough mother,” arguing that perfection in caregiving is neither attainable nor desirable. A mother’s occasional failures help a child’s psychological development, as well as their individuation, resilience and independence. The psychoanalytic tradition, from Winnicott’s “good enough mother” to Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic writings on abjection, describes the maternal body as both familiar and threatening, suggesting that the process of mothering involves a confrontation with boundary dissolution and identity fragmentation. From the standpoint of developmental psychology, becoming a mother involves a radical reorganization of identity.

Sudhir Kakar observes that Indian motherhood is shaped more by notions of duty and sacrifice than by emotional authenticity or self-reflection. The absence of legitimizing discourse around maternal mental health contributes to the silencing of ambivalence, guilt, and even distress in the maternal psyche. As theorists like Daniel Stern have proposed in *The Motherhood Constellation*, the transition to motherhood is not merely biological but deeply psychological, involving an internal restructuring of the self around the child’s needs. This reorientation is often accompanied by conflicting emotions—what psychoanalyst Rozsika Parker describes as “maternal ambivalence,” a psychological state where affection and frustration coexist. These emotional contradictions are not pathological; they are constitutive of maternal subjectivity. Recent studies have emphasized that such emotional contradictions are common among both biological and adoptive mothers, and acknowledging them can contribute to psychological resilience and healthier caregiving relationships (Chapman and Gubi; Raneberg and Maccallum). Rather than being pathologized, ambivalence can be seen as a reflection of the depth and complexity of maternal subjectivity. However, when societies deny women the right to acknowledge these feelings, they risk pushing mothers into cycles of guilt, shame, and emotional repression. In India, these psychological realities are often overlooked in favour of prescriptive cultural roles.

Feminist and Sociological Perspectives on Motherhood

Feminist theory provides a critical lens to examine how motherhood is constructed, institutionalized, and controlled. In her seminal work *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich distinguishes between the institution of motherhood—a patriarchal tool—and the experience of mothering, which is emotionally rich but socially constrained. This distinction is crucial in understanding how women’s maternal identities are shaped not by desire alone but by historically entrenched power structures. Feminist psychoanalysts, such as Kakar, explore the emotional enmeshment within Indian mother-child relationships,

particularly the idealization of the mother-son bond. These dynamics complicate the psychological autonomy of women and often silence expressions of emotional fatigue or dissent. In the Indian sociocultural matrix, motherhood is not simply personal; it is also political. Uma Chakravarti and Nivedita Menon have shown how nationalist narratives instrumentalize the maternal figure as Bharat Mata, the sacred motherland, thus linking the female body with territory, purity, and moral rectitude. The mother, in such constructions, is expected to uphold cultural values, often at the cost of her desires, identity, or dissent. Sociological theories, such as Talcott Parsons's functionalist view of the family, place the mother at the centre of emotional and moral socialization, reinforcing her role as caregiver and emotional anchor. However, Marxist feminist critiques (Engels; Federici) argue that such roles sustain capitalist and patriarchal labour systems by rendering unpaid reproductive labour invisible. In India, the intersection of caste, religion, and gender further complicates maternal roles. Lower-caste and tribal mothers, for example, are rarely depicted in dominant narratives except as objects of suffering or sacrifice. Their ambivalence, fatigue, or rebellion is often erased. Dalit feminist scholars, such as Sharmila Rege and Baby Kamble, have foregrounded this erasure, insisting that maternal experience is not universal but deeply stratified.

Sociopolitical Constructions of Motherhood in India

In the Indian sociopolitical context, motherhood becomes more than an emotional role; it becomes a tool of ideological discipline. It has been systematically weaponized as a symbol of purity, sacrifice, national virtue, as a moral measuring stick, and as a convenient site of control over women's bodies and desires. Political narratives often invoke the maternal figure to galvanize emotions, justify protective patriarchy, or discipline dissent. Chakravarti notes how this image emerged during the colonial freedom struggle and continues to shape ideas of womanhood, linking female honour to national pride. Postindependence, state policies have further regulated motherhood through family planning, maternal health schemes, and population control campaigns—often coercively targeted at marginalized communities (Hodges). Motherhood is thus tied not only to personal identity but to national productivity and moral legitimacy. In the Indian context, particularly among mothers in Kolkata, such emotional tensions are further influenced by cultural expectations, family pressure, and changing roles (Chowdhury Lahiri), making ambivalence a deeply embedded and normalized emotional dynamic in the caregiving journey. Women who resist or complicate the image of the self-sacrificing mother—whether through abortion, ambivalence, career prioritization, or just not wanting to be a mother—are often judged as deviant. The burden of ideal motherhood, thus, extends beyond the domestic space and into the realm of the nation-state.

Indian Literature and Cinema: Shifting the Gaze

Literature and cinema offer crucial spaces to trace continuity and rupture in the representation of mothers. Traditional texts, such as *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, portray archetypal mothers—Kausalya, Kaikeyi, and Gandhari—each marked by duty, grief, or manipulation. In contrast, modern Indian literature (in Bengali as well as in other Indian languages), such as Mahasweta Devi's *Breast-Giver* (*Stanadayini*), interrogates exploitative maternal labour and critiques how female bodies are used for both reproduction and ideological reproduction. Ismat Chughtai's *Mother of a Corpse* reveals the psychological detachment of a mother numbed by grief and societal neglect. In their novels, Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai offer portrayals of mothers who are absent, distant, or emotionally conflicted, raising fundamental questions about whether motherhood must necessarily equate to nurturing or fulfilment. These literary explorations parallel clinical understandings of maternal ambivalence and affirm that such complexity is not pathological but deeply human. They also underscore that the emotional terrain of motherhood is shaped as much by internal psychology as by cultural, political, and social expectations. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Shashi Deshpande portrays a mother who oscillates between guilt and resentment, illustrating how internalized societal expectations can erode selfhood. Similarly, Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* introduces an emotionally absent mother whose silence leaves lasting psychological scars on her children. In her poetry and autobiography *My Story*, Kamala Das deconstructs the idea of maternal fulfilment, foregrounding ambivalence, bodily discomfort, and unmet emotional needs.

Contemporary Indian cinema (in Bengali and other Indian languages) has begun to feature mothers who deviate from the ideal characters in many films, as they struggle with identity, ambivalence, and resistance. These narratives allow for a more nuanced understanding of motherhood as emotionally rich and politically fraught. Cinema, as a reflection of popular culture, has reinforced these constructions. The iconic 1957 film *Mother India* depicts the mother as a moral epicentre, upholding justice even at the cost of maternal instinct. While emotionally powerful, such portrayals homogenize motherhood and exclude narratives of ambivalence, rage, or resistance. In *Astitva*, the protagonist's affair and concealed maternity complicate notions of purity and maternal legitimacy. *English Vinglish* subtly explores emotional neglect and maternal invisibility, while *Monsoon Wedding* critiques maternal silence in the face of abuse. *Thappad* presents generational maternal disillusionment, questioning the societal valorization of maternal endurance. *Kapoor & Sons* portrays a mother grappling with favouritism and emotional tension, offering a realistic depiction of everyday maternal struggles. Modern Indian cinematic portrayals of motherhood are deeply rooted in introspection, sociopolitical

critique, and psychological realism. Bengali cinema, in particular, has long offered a more nuanced and layered portrayal of motherhood. For example, Satyajit Ray's *Mahanagar* shows a woman stepping into the workforce, thereby destabilizing traditional expectations of maternal roles. Subsequently, in Rituparno Ghosh's *Unishe April*, a daughter confronts her mother's emotional absence and professional ambitions, revealing the ambivalence, guilt, and generational tension embedded in Bengali reconstructions of motherhood (Majumdar). These films not only reflect Bengali cultural specificities but also foreground motherhood as a site of negotiation between care and selfhood.

Bengali narratives—shaped by the bhadramahila tradition, Renaissance humanism, and postcolonial reimaginings—portray motherhood not merely as a biological destiny but a psychological and social journey. This dynamic stands in contrast to broader Indian cinematic tropes where the mother's agency is often subsumed under her role as a caregiver (Chakrabarti; Chatterjee).

This article seeks to explore the emotional and psychological landscapes of maternal ambivalence as represented in Indian narratives. Drawing upon key psychological frameworks—including attachment theory, psychodynamic formulations of self and identity, and feminist critiques of motherhood—it argues that portrayals of conflicted or imperfect mothers challenge the hegemony of the saintly maternal ideal and offer a more authentic rendering of motherhood as a lived psychological process.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research method, focussing on how mothers in Kolkata make sense of their lived experiences of motherhood. The aim is to explore the emotional complexities, particularly maternal ambivalence, and understand how sociocultural, familial, and intergenerational contexts shape these experiences.

Semistructured, in-depth personal interviews were conducted between 2020 and 2025, allowing for flexible and context-sensitive discussions in Kolkata, India. Twenty mothers (both biological and adoptive) participated in this study after providing informed consent. As per the principles of qualitative research, diversity in the sample in terms of sociodemographic characteristics allows for richer data and broader and comprehensive insights (Allmark). Hence, the sample ensured diversity in sociodemographic profiles, including age (twenty-eight to forty-six years old), educational qualification (e.g., graduate and postgraduate), profession (e.g., homemaker, lawyer, school teacher, professor, bank employee, IT professional, and self-employed), duration of motherhood experience (i.e., two years and seven months to thirteen years), family type (e.g., nuclear, joint, and extended). However, the

diversification of the sample in terms of certain sociopsychological parameters, such as caste and economic status, was not done.

The present study employed the snowball sampling technique to recruit participants. As participants tend to refer individuals within their own socio-economic, cultural, and caste networks, this method often results in a degree of homogeneity (Atkinson and Flint). Consequently, the study was unable to reach participants from Dalit communities. Each interview lasted between forty-five and ninety minutes and was conducted in Bengali.

Interviews were conducted in person, depending on convenience and safety protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interview included open-ended questions focussed on emotional experiences and internal conflicts associated with motherhood, feelings of guilt, anger, joy, detachment, or resentment, the role of the spouse and extended family in caregiving, and cultural and social expectations surrounding mothering and intergenerational perspectives on childcare. Participants were encouraged to narrate freely, and probing questions were used to deepen the understanding of emotionally nuanced responses. All interviews were audiorecorded with the participants' permission and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The data were then thematically analyzed, using Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's thematic analysis method.

All participants received written and verbal information about the study. Consent was documented. Pseudonyms were used, and all identifying information was removed from transcripts and research documentation. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Since the topic involves emotional vulnerability, participants were cared for during or after the interview.

This article explores how they navigate their motherhood journey along with the feelings of maternal ambivalence. From the semistructured interviews, some significant narratives came out. The themes emerging from the observation reveal a rich tapestry of emotional complexity and sociocultural negotiation in the lived experiences of mothers in contemporary Kolkata, India. In this article, our discussion aims to situate these findings within broader psychological, feminist, and sociopolitical frameworks. By linking individual narratives with theoretical constructs, we tried to explore how maternal ambivalence is shaped, suppressed, or normalized within contemporary Indian society. This transition from descriptive to interpretative inquiry allows for a deeper engagement with existing literature, illuminating not just what mothers feel but why these feelings matter in the wider discourse on their identity.

Results and Discussion

Negotiating Maternal Ambivalence

The experience of maternal ambivalence highlights the emotional contradictions embedded in mothering. The interviews suggest that maternal ambivalence is not an anomaly but a common, though often unspoken, aspect of motherhood. Winnicott, a psychoanalytic theorist, asserts that ambivalence is an inherent part of maternal love, where the mother must hold conflicting feelings—such as affection, irritation, protectiveness, and resentment—without being overwhelmed by them. This study supports such a view. However, in the Indian context, mothers, especially Bengali ones, are socialized to conform to the ideal of the ever-giving, patient, and self-sacrificing mother. The internalization of this ideal generates significant emotional strain for contemporary mothers in urban areas of Kolkata.

Participants expressed a complex spectrum of emotions regarding motherhood. Some described overwhelming love and joy, while others were candid about feelings of exhaustion, irritability, and identity loss during the process of mothering. Several mothers described ambivalence not as a binary state but as a fluid experience, with love and resentment often occurring simultaneously. For instance, one working mother, aged thirty-four, stated: “Sometimes I just want to run away for a day. I love my child, but I don’t want to be around anyone. It’s confusing, and I feel guilty even thinking this.” Another participant, a forty-four-year-old adoptive mother, reported: “Sometimes I feel exhausted and long for a break from the daily responsibilities of childcare. But then I remind myself that I chose to adopt my child, fully aware of the challenges involved, and I end up dismissing my feelings and turning that frustration inwards, becoming angry at myself.”

Many participants, mainly working mothers, reported that they experience difficulty in their work-life balance, which is followed by negative emotions. A forty-year-old working mother expressed tension between professional identity and maternal duties: “I love my child, but I also love my job. Sometimes, I feel like I’m failing at both.” Such expressions resonate with Parker’s assertion that ambivalence is not a deviation but a central aspect of maternal subjectivity. Mothers who acknowledged these feelings also reported psychological distress when they failed to live up to societal or internalized ideals of perfect motherhood. These findings also resonate with feminist theories challenging the essentialist portrayal of motherhood. Rich distinguishes between the experience and the institution of motherhood, arguing that women’s lived realities are often in conflict with patriarchal representations. Similarly, poststructural feminists, like Kristeva, argue that maternal ambivalence is not pathological but a sign of subjectivity in flux—a psychic negotiation of the self concerning the other (e.g., the child, family, and society).

However, other participants, especially those with greater emotional literacy or supportive networks, expressed self-awareness and actively coped with these feelings. A thirty-nine-year-old participant remarked: “I know I do wrong sometimes, feel angry sometimes. But I don’t regret that. It’s part of the tough job of mothering.” These accounts illustrate varying levels of emotional integration and psychological adaptation, supporting Winnicott’s notion of the “good enough mother,” who accepts her limitations without collapsing under the pressure of perfection.

An important yet understated finding of this study is how mothers resist and redefine motherhood on their terms. Some consciously rejected the perfect mother image, acknowledging their struggles and setting boundaries. Others found empowerment in sharing their experiences with peer groups or through journaling.

Changing Role of Familial Support

A striking finding of this study was the universality of familial support. The evolving findings indicate that several participants reported positive emotional experiences about the support provided by their families. They are not criticized or judged for their actions. Rather cohesiveness, communication style, emotional connection, expressed emotion, and the overall family dynamics help the mothers of Kolkata to accept their maternal ambivalence and cope positively with the emotional turmoil.

Sociologically, the study reflects Parsons’s view of the family as a site of socialization and emotional regulation. While Parsons emphasized the mother’s expressive role, today’s mothers seem to be negotiating multiple expressive and instrumental roles, sometimes without institutional support. As a result, maternal ambivalence becomes a site of emotional labour, silently endured but rarely legitimized.

Some of the participants reported that their husbands shared parenting responsibilities along with their professional hazards. This finding challenges traditional notions of Indian patriarchal society, where caregiving is primarily the mother’s burden, even in a city like Kolkata. However, this support did not necessarily protect mothers from internal guilt or societal judgment. One adoptive mother of thirty-seven years said, “My husband does everything—from feeding to changing diapers—but people still look at me if something goes wrong. They never blame the father.” Another thirty-seven-year-old participant said, “Even when my husband helps, the judgment comes to me. If my child is sick, they ask what I did wrong.” This sentiment reflects Kristen Howerton’s sociological concept of the “default parent,” a gendered expectation deeply entrenched in patriarchal family systems. Even in households with equitable distribution of labour, the emotional and moral burden of parenting was disproportionately carried by mothers. The dynamic illustrates the

emotional labour disproportionately borne by mothers, despite help. Emotional buffering from partners did ease some psychological stress, but it did not completely negate societal pressure or pressures coming from the extended family, which underscores the gendered nature of accountability in parenting. Even in supportive households, societal expectations remain disproportionately skewed. This observation aligns with Rich's idea of the institution of motherhood as separate from the experience of mothering, where external systems continue to define normative behaviour, even when internal family dynamics evolve.

In Indian culture, family dynamics are shaped not only by visible markers, such as caste, religion, and regional culture, but also by deeply embedded sociocultural norms that govern interpersonal relationships, gender roles, and caregiving responsibilities. Although the structure may vary, from joint families to nuclear households, there remains a set of implicit and explicit rules dictating behaviour, decision-making, and the division of responsibilities within the household. These rules often stem from a collectivist ethos, where family unity, obligation, and interdependence are prioritized over individual autonomy (Chadda and Deb). This situation creates a distinctive familial framework that differs from many Western contexts, where family roles tend to be more egalitarian and individualistic in orientation (Verma and Saraswathi). Importantly, even when socioeconomic status, education, or urbanization reduces traditional differences, Indian families often maintain culturally specific patterns of authority, caregiving expectations, and conflict resolution strategies, reflecting their unique sociohistorical evolution (Seymour). In collectivist societies, such as India, kinship networks extend beyond the nuclear family to include relatives and neighbours, who often take on quasifamilial roles. These extended networks provide emotional, practical, and even financial support during significant life events. In such cultural contexts, the boundaries between family and community are fluid, and neighbours may participate in childrearing, share household responsibilities, or act as confidants in times of stress. (Triandis; Sinha and Verma). In India, including Kolkata, the social expectation that caregiving is a collective duty often reduces the mother's isolation but can also lead to heightened scrutiny and reinforcement of traditional gender norms. Thus, extended family and community involvement provide crucial support while regulating maternal roles.

While family support (especially from spouses) was a protective factor, it did not shield mothers from the broader societal scrutiny. Participants highlighted how social media, neighbourhood gossip, and even casual comments from relatives could amplify feelings of inadequacy. This aligns with Susan J. Douglas and Meredith Michaels's critique of the "new momism," which portrays ideal motherhood as an all-consuming and joyful task, leaving little

room for doubt, fatigue, or failure. At the same time, some mothers expressed gratitude and pride in their roles, embracing ambivalence as part of a fuller, more authentic experience. This attitude reflects a shift from idealized to individualized motherhood—a shift that is emerging slowly in urban India.

Social Expectations and Emotional Guilt

Most participants expressed a profound sense of social surveillance. Some of them feared being perceived as cold or negligent for expressing exhaustion or frustration, reflecting the enduring myth of the selfless, ever-giving mother. Some of them experienced guilt regarding their ambivalence. Even when mothers intellectually accepted their negative feelings, they struggled with the emotional turmoil of societal disapproval. Cultural narratives equating motherhood with divine selflessness amplify these feelings of inadequacy. Several mothers recalled unsolicited advice from neighbours, relatives, and even coworkers about how to “balance everything with a smile.” One working mother, aged thirty, said: “Many people from my surroundings said, ‘Oh, you’re so lucky. You have helping hands. Why are you tired?’—as if I don’t have a right to feel anything but happiness.” Another twenty-eight-year-old participant said, “If I say I’m tired, people say I’m complaining. If I say I miss my old life, they say I’m selfish.” These comments reflect internalized social norms, echoing Rich’s differentiation between motherhood as experience and as an institution. Even the progressive mothers of Kolkata felt bound by cultural expectations of perfection. This emotional pressure was compounded by the ideal of the Indian mother as all-sacrificing, which is still dominant in public imagination and cinematic portrayals. Even progressive films, while offering nuanced representations (e.g., *English Vinglish* and *Mom*), often circle back to morally redemptive resolutions, reinforcing that ambivalence must be transformed into selfless action.

Psychologically, this dynamic creates a splitting of the self—a refusal of anger, fatigue, or personal need, leading to chronic stress or depressive symptoms (Kristeva). Her conceptualization of motherhood as a space of identity dissolution and regeneration is particularly relevant. Many participants described motherhood as both a transformative and destabilizing experience. The psychological demand of constantly being “on call,” emotionally and physically, can exhaust the mother’s sense of autonomy and self. Several participants also noted how social media amplifies these pressures. The curated portrayals of happy mothers and perfect families further alienate those who struggle. Some mothers withdrew from these platforms as an act of resistance. In this regard, ambivalence becomes not only an emotional phenomenon but also a sociopolitical effect, regulated through patriarchal morality.

Feminist scholars, such as Arlie Hochschild, have emphasized the concept of emotional labour: the management of one’s emotions to meet societal

expectations. Mothers, especially those engaged in paid work, perform dual emotional labour in their profession and home. This dual role becomes even more complex in Indian families, where caregiving is still seen as primarily a maternal duty.

Nancy Chodorow's influential theory of the reproduction of mothering suggests that maternal roles are not only inherited through early relational experiences but are also culturally reinforced and perpetuated across generations. However, modern mothers, particularly those in urban settings with access to education and resources, are beginning to break this cycle by asserting new norms. By voicing their ambivalence, participants challenged the stigma associated with it. Their narratives serve as acts of resistance—against idealization, against silence, and against the moral policing that defines traditional motherhood.

This study reinforces how motherhood intersects with the mothers' sociocultural background, family structure, and employment status. Working mothers faced distinct challenges, including feeling guilty over spending a limited time with their children and societal judgment. Nonworking mothers, meanwhile, struggled with identity erosion and invisibility. In both cases, emotional labour was central to their daily lives. Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw) also helps us understand how multiple axes of identity (e.g., gender, sociocultural background, marital status, and employment) interact to shape maternal experiences.

Intergenerational Conflict

A particularly salient theme was intergenerational conflict, reported by nearly all participants. Participants frequently spoke of disagreements with their parents or parents-in-law over parenting styles, dietary choices, discipline, and screen time. The older generation often disapproved of modern parenting methods, creating tension. A forty-one-year-old participant, an adoptee mother, shared: "My mother thinks I should quit my job and be with my child full-time. She did that. But I can't. I love my work." Such tensions reflect a clash of values between traditional and contemporary models of motherhood. One of the participants reported: "My mother thinks I spoil my child because I don't scold him. She says, 'In our time, we feared our parents.'" Another participant expressed that her parents would become furious if their granddaughter were scolded. For the older generation, maternal identity is deeply embedded in sacrifice and domestic centrality. These intergenerational conflicts highlight evolving definitions of parenting. Younger mothers often emphasized emotional attunement, consent, and positive reinforcement, whereas the older generation upheld discipline and obedience as central to parenting. This theme also points to a broader shift, with the younger generations negotiating autonomy within traditional structures. The friction

between progressive and traditional ideologies reflects not only differing parenting styles but also broader sociocultural transitions in contemporary society. Today's mothers often strive to balance career, autonomy, and caregiving—a dynamic frequently misunderstood or dismissed by elders. Such conflicts highlight a generational divide in values and emotional literacy. Participants navigated this by selectively asserting autonomy while maintaining familial harmony. This theme reflects broader societal shifts in parenting ideologies and the negotiation of traditional authority structures. This intergenerational dissonance leads to emotional strain, especially when mothers feel they must constantly defend their parenting choices, even within the family. The conflict also reinforces internal ambivalence, trying to be a modern, empowered mother while carrying the emotional residue of traditional expectations. From a psychological lens, these intergenerational conflicts point to unresolved intergenerational transmission of maternal ideals, wherein women are both inheritors and challengers of the maternal scripts they were raised with (Stern).

Intergenerational tensions over parenting practices were a recurring theme in this study. These conflicts often centred on discipline, emotional expression, and the balance of authority. Hochschild and historian Stephanie Coontz have both written about how parenting norms are historically and culturally constructed. As parenting practices evolve in response to psychological insights and child development research, older family members may feel displaced or undermined, leading to friction. The findings suggest that these intergenerational dynamics are not merely personal disagreements but reflect broader shifts in family ideology and generational identity. Mothers often find themselves mediating between these competing paradigms, adding another layer to their emotional burden.

This study's findings suggest that maternal ambivalence in contemporary Kolkata is not only a psychological state but a socially mediated experience, shaped by cultural scripts, gendered expectations, as well as familial structures, gender expectations, intergenerational values, and institutional norms. Mothers oscillate between emotional authenticity and normative compliance.

Conclusion

This study explores maternal ambivalence in the context of urban motherhood (i.e., educated and upper-caste mothers with a middle socioeconomic status), shedding light on the psychological, social, and cultural complexities of being a mother in a rapidly changing society. Through in-depth interviews with twenty mothers in Kolkata, this research offers an intimate and multifaceted view of how maternal identity is negotiated, contested, and lived.

Key findings include the normalization of ambivalent emotions, the role of

spouses and families, the burden of social expectations, and the friction caused by intergenerational parenting ideologies. These findings support the assertion that maternal ambivalence is not a sign of dysfunction but a natural response to the conflicting demands of motherhood.

From a psychological standpoint, the study reaffirms that acknowledging ambivalence is crucial for maternal mental health. Denying or suppressing these feelings leads to internalized guilt, self-criticism, and emotional exhaustion. Creating spaces for mothers to share and validate their feelings—whether through therapy, community forums, or popular media—is essential.

Feminist and sociological perspectives further emphasize the structural and cultural dimensions of motherhood. The enduring myth of the saintly mother, reinforced by traditional values and modern media, continues to shape women's experiences in profound ways. However, the study also finds signs of transformation, with mothers actively negotiating their roles and seeking to redefine what it means to be a good mother.

This research's implications are both academic and practical. For psychologists and mental health professionals, these implications call for more culturally nuanced approaches to maternal care. Interventions must move away from pathologizing ambivalent feelings and instead validate them as part of the normal spectrum of maternal experience—particularly within the Indian cultural context, where expressions of dissatisfaction, fatigue, or resentment may be silenced by the pressure to embody the selfless mother ideal.

For policymakers, the research underscores the urgency of developing family-friendly policies that actively integrate maternal mental health as a core component of child and family welfare programs. This may include the creation of accessible mental health support systems at the community level, parental leave policies that consider the needs of both mothers and fathers, and public health campaigns that challenge gendered assumptions about caregiving.

Importantly, educational programs should address rigid gender role expectations in parenting, empowering fathers to participate as equal caregivers and thereby easing the emotional and practical load traditionally placed on mothers. In doing so, the broader sociocultural environment can transform into a supportive one.

Future work should expand this inquiry to rural and marginalized (Dalit) communities, where the intersection of caste, class, and access to care might reveal different dimensions of ambivalence. Moreover, there is a need for public mental health frameworks that allow mothers to voice contradictory feelings without fear of moral judgment.

In closing, this study honours the voices of mothers who, despite facing immense pressures, choose to speak their truths. Their narratives reflect not

weakness but the strength to hold love and frustration in the same breath and the courage to question inherited ideals. In doing so, these mothers not only reclaim their emotional authenticity but also pave the way for a more inclusive, compassionate, and realistic understanding of motherhood in India.

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KATE GOLDING

After Weaning

Artist Statement

After Weaning is a series of photographic works created by hand-expressing human milk directly onto silver gelatin photographic paper. Originally devised as a strategy to prevent mastitis after my child stopped breastfeeding, this act evolved into an artistic ritual—an exploration of lactation as embodied labour and an honouring of this vital carework.

Utilizing human milk as both medium and subject allowed for an interrogation of maternal aesthetics, body boundaries, and care within a feminist framework. At varying intervals over twelve months, I would trigger a let-down by hand-expressing my breastmilk onto sheets of silver gelatin paper, exposing the paper to ambient light conditions in my home studio. The photosensitive paper captured the milk's chemical interaction with light and time.

Exposure times varied from a few minutes to hours, depending on environmental factors, such as time of day, temperature, seasonal changes in daylight, and domestic interruptions. These variables directly affected the visual outcomes, particularly the colours that emerged. No two prints were the same, and results were impossible to replicate due to changing conditions from month to month, exposure to exposure. Over time, as my milk supply diminished, so did the volume of droplets recorded on the photographic emulsion, resulting in an evolving series that documents physiological change through an alternative photographic process—the lumen print.

While the making was conducted privately, the process itself was performative—a repetitive, embodied gesture conducted over time. The durational nature of the work, spanning a year beyond active breastfeeding, echoes cycles of depletion and renewal, visibility and erasure. The ritual marked not just the end of lactation but the slow, often unspoken maternal

grief associated with weaning (Rich 18–19). Our feeding journey had been marred by recurrent mastitis and nipple pain, but I persisted and fed my child until they started to lose interest after two years of feeding. When it was over, I missed it immensely and felt the need to record the end of the milk production and use the milk creatively.

This work sits within the lineage of feminist body art and maternal aesthetics, in conversation with artists such as Helen Chadwick and Kiki Smith, and their reframing of the body, its fluids, and byproducts as artistic material and inspiration (Betterton 61–63, 81–82; Heartney 207, 210). In addition, theorist Julia Kristeva's writing on abjection and maternal semiotics informs the tension between attraction and repulsion in these images (Betterton 10; Elkin 37–38, 56), Breastmilk, typically confined to the private realm, is recontextualised as an agent of aesthetic production—a visual representation of the messiness of these life-giving bodily fluids.

The droplets and splashes of milk captured in each image often take on a luminescent, nebula-like appearance. The interaction between the milk, the available light, and the photographic emulsion resulted in images that are both materially indexical and formally abstract. Their abstraction destabilizes the boundaries between the body's interior, the cosmological vastness, and the stardust residing in all of us.

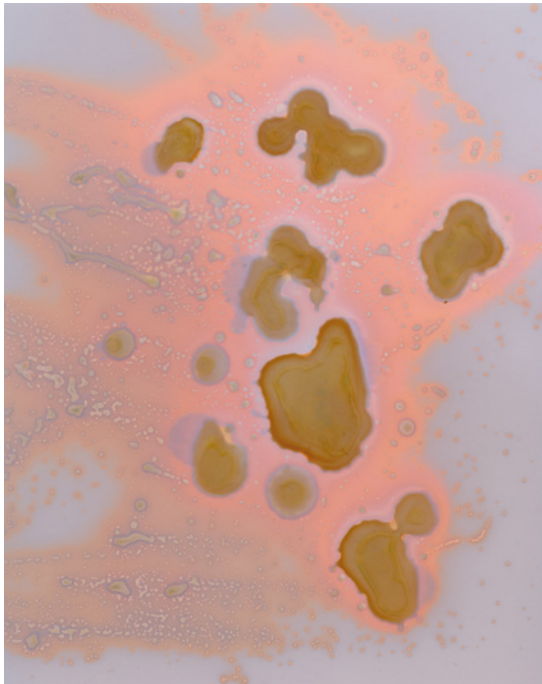
For the exhibition, fourteen of the original 8 x 10-inch lumen prints were scanned, enlarged to 42 x 51 inches, and printed on cotton muslin—a textile often used to swaddle newborn infants. The works are suspended from the ceiling in a spiral to create an immersive space. The lightweight fabric moves as people enter the installation and interact with the work. The muslin functions as both a symbolic and literal reference to care while enlarging the scale of the images amplifies the immersive potential of the installation, transforming an intimate gesture into an environment for the viewer to inhabit.

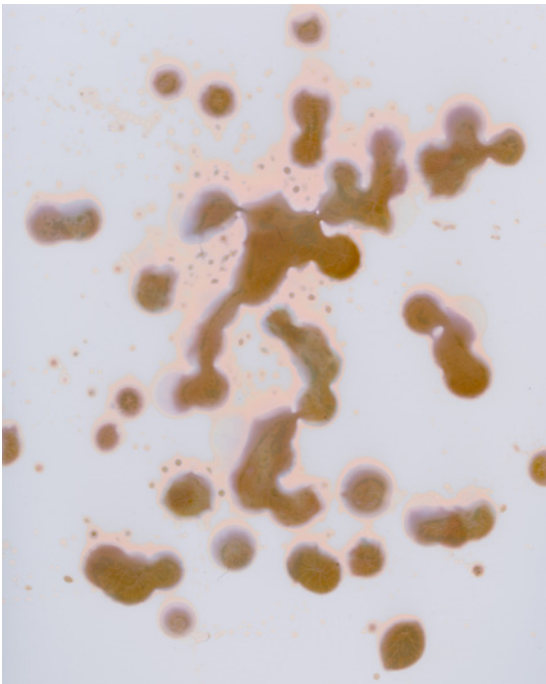
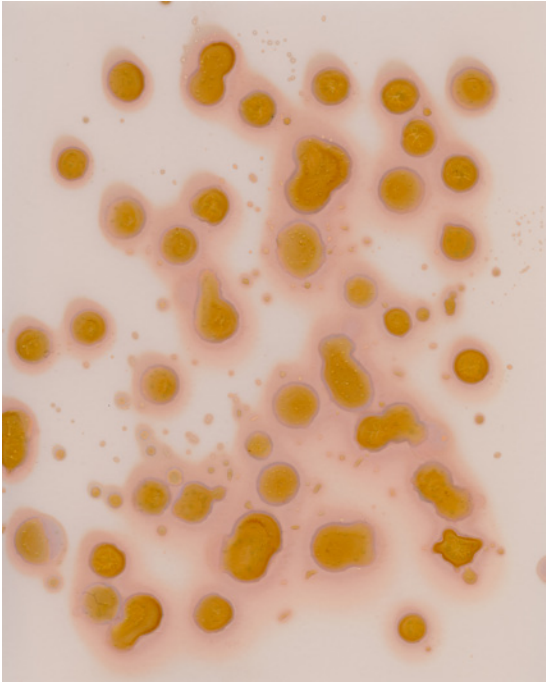
Exhibitions of this work centre a child-inclusive ethos and are accompanied by public programs, such as toddler story time within the gallery, creative workshops for children and their adults, invitations for children to touch the artworks, and space within the exhibition for workshop participants to add their artworks to the gallery walls. These events have brought together children and their primary caregivers with others at a similar life stage. The aim is to create a family-friendly, intergenerational space that reconceives the gallery as a site of community care rather than a rarefied space, accessible only to adults.

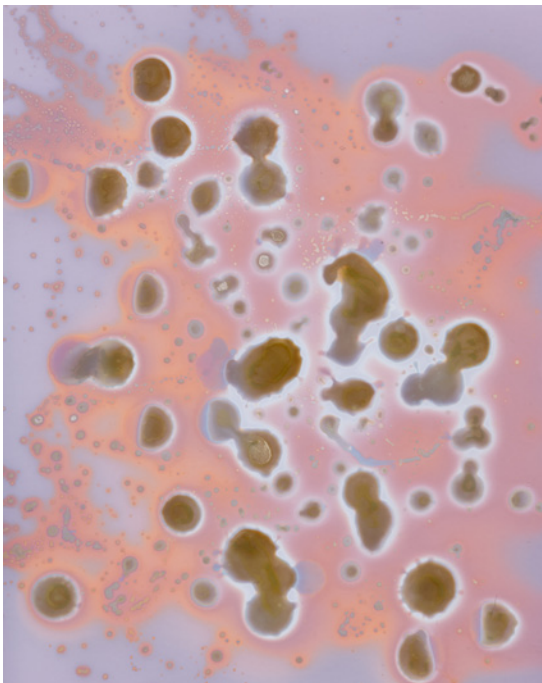
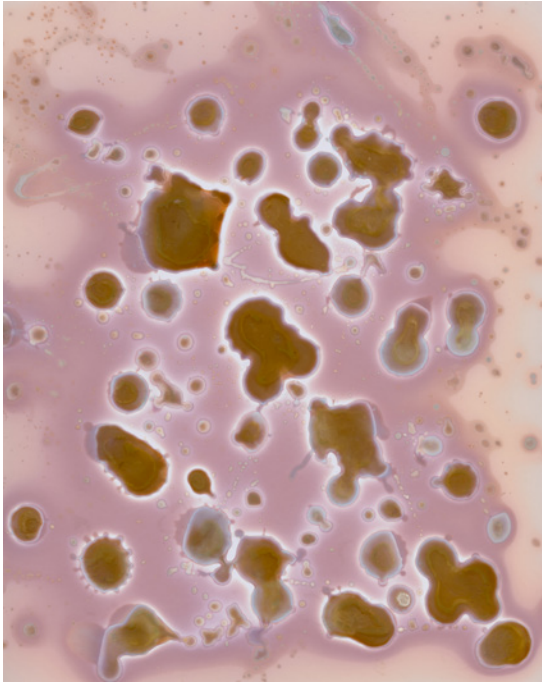
The majority of the lumen prints in *After Weaning* were made during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns of 2020. A time when women were more likely to exit the workforce to provide unpaid caregiving (Wood et al.). The global pandemic demonstrated how essential carework is. However, in Australia, whereas infant formula, cow's milk and paid childcare are included

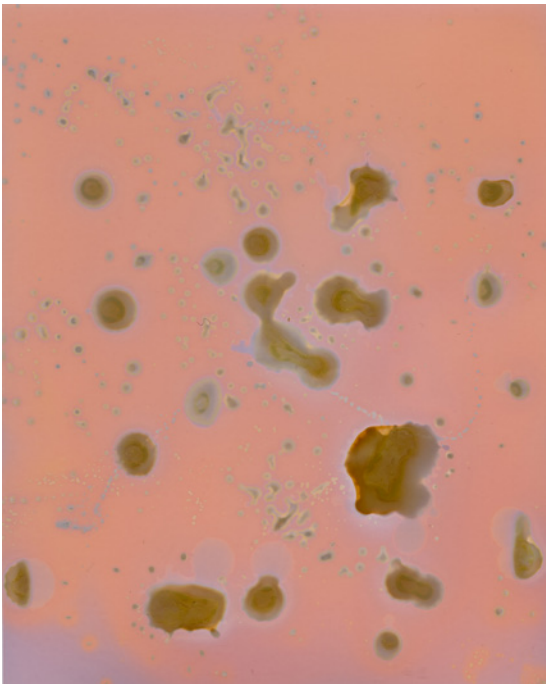
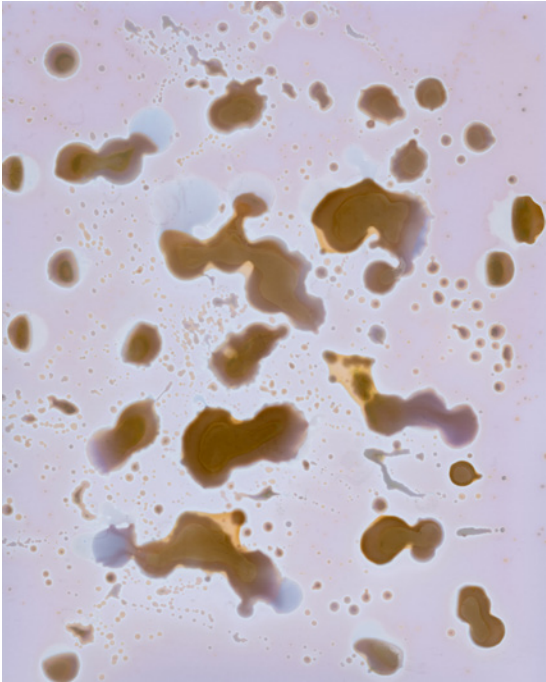
in the GDP, human milk and domestic caregiving are not (Smith). In *Essential Labor: Mothering as Social Change*, Angela Garbes argues that mothering is crucial and necessary work—a labour that can be rendered invisible by the structures and systems in which many of us live (Golding). In making and exhibiting these artworks, I aimed to bring to light a private element of my mothering and carework and then create a public space for collective care and mutual support.

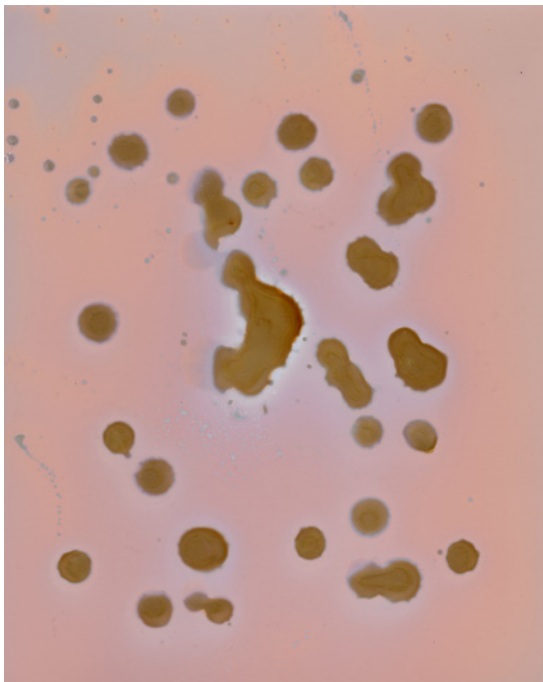
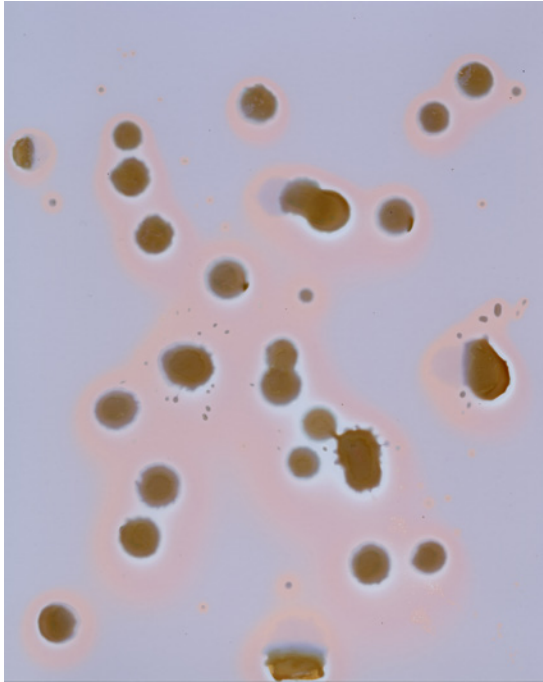
At its core, *After Weaning* is a meditation on the politics of care and the undervalued labour of birth-giving bodies. It invites viewers to consider the physical, emotional, and social dimensions of caregiving—not as an after-thought but as central to the making and sustaining of life and society. By making visible the slow, embodied processes of lactation, the artworks reclaim maternal work as a site of aesthetic, political, and emotional significance.

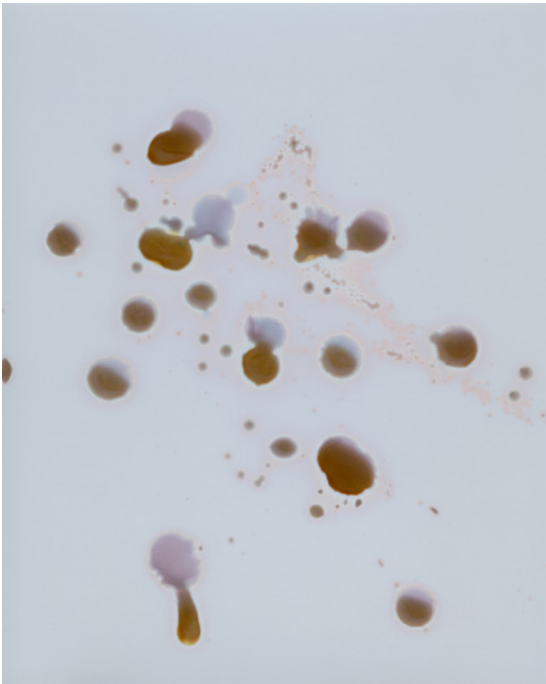


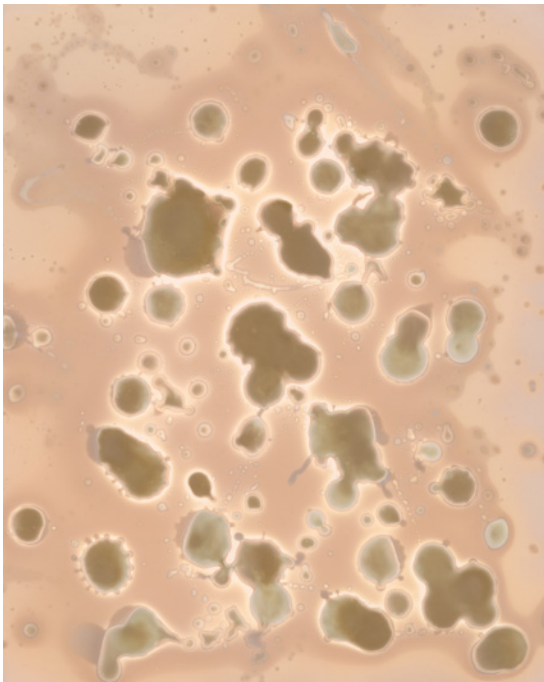




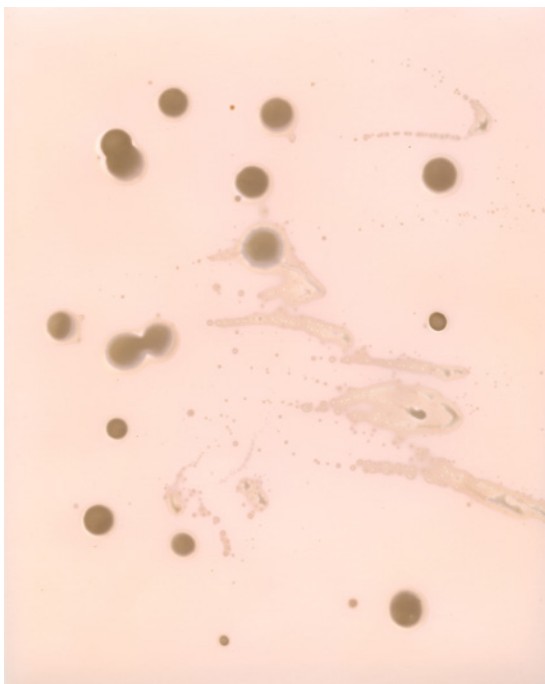








KATE GOLDING



Kate Golding, *Labours of Love*, including *After Weaning*, installation view, ArtSpace at Realm, Melbourne, Australia, 2024. Photograph by Andrew Curtis.



Kate Golding, *Labours of Love*, including *After Weaning*, installation view, ArtSpace at Realm, Melbourne, Australia, 2024. Photograph by Andrew Curtis.



Kate Golding, *After Weaning*, installation view, ArtSpace at Realm, Melbourne, Australia, 2024. Photograph by Kate Golding.



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Kate Golding, *After Weaning*, installation view, ArtSpace at Realm, Melbourne, Australia, 2024. Photograph by Kate Golding.

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“What If Your Water Breaks during Class?” Student Messages about Faculty Pregnancy in Academic Spaces

This study examines memorable messages that pregnant faculty members receive from their students in academic settings. Drawing on survey data from 172 tenure-track female faculty who experienced pregnancy during their academic careers, the research identifies how pregnancy, as a visible manifestation of faculty members' personal lives, disrupts the ideal worker norm in higher education. Thematic analysis revealed three dominant patterns in student-to-faculty messages: concerns about academic impact, reactions to embodied disruption in academic spaces, and perceptions of professional capacity. These interactions function as more than fleeting remarks; they become lasting reference points through which faculty make sense of their identities as mothers and scholars. The findings demonstrate how pregnancy in academia represents a unique communicative phenomenon where personal and professional identities visibly intersect, often challenging institutional expectations of disembodied professionalism. By examining these memorable messages, this research illuminates how motherhood in academic settings is simultaneously celebrated, scrutinized, supported, and surveilled, with implications that extend beyond pregnancy itself and shape women's long-term professional trajectories and sense of belonging in higher education.

Motherhood is a dynamic journey that evolves throughout the life course, with pregnancy marking a pivotal moment that transforms both personal identity and social interactions. Unlike other aspects of parenting that remain private, pregnancy manifests as a visible, corporeal experience that often elicits both welcome and unwelcome community engagement. As this life course transition intersects with professional identity, latent cultural expectations for work and motherhood also become visible, particularly in academic settings.

For women in academia, pregnancy represents just one stage in the continuum of work-life balance, yet it serves as a particularly visible marker of their evolving identities as both scholars and mothers. This physical manifestation of motherhood frequently elicits responses from one's community, such as touches, comments, and unsolicited advice, as well as good wishes and congratulations. These communicative interactions, however, also provide valuable insight into the cultural expectations placed upon women navigating the maternal within academic contexts.

The concept of “memorable messages”—significant communications that recipients remember for extended periods and perceive as influential—offers a theoretical framework to analyze these interactions. Previous research has shown that memorable messages shape professional identity and performance in organizational settings. However, little is known about memorable messages within academic contexts, particularly the messages that visibly pregnant faculty members might receive from students.

This study identifies and analyzes the memorable messages that academic women recalled from their students during pregnancy. Focussing on this transition moment in women's lives offers a greater understanding of the climate for women in academia, potentially illuminating the factors contributing to their diminishing presence in higher education. This analysis seeks to identify the expectations communicated to mother-scholars and how mothers are supported in or excluded from academic environments.

Literature Review

Pregnancy represents a unique life moment where the boundaries between personal and public become blurred and the biological process becomes subject to collective scrutiny and evaluation. As a pregnant woman moves through public spaces, cultural expectations of motherhood begin to shape her interactions with others. Casual conversations about due dates and gender reveal broader societal expectations about ideal maternal behaviour and identity. These interactions often shift into subtle and not-so-subtle attempts to dictate how women should behave, eat, move, and feel during pregnancy, policing women's bodies through reinforcement of dominant cultural expressions of motherhood. This monitoring represents a more troubling dimension of pregnancy's public nature: the widespread societal belief that pregnant bodies require oversight to ensure conformity to the established ideals of maternal sacrifice and responsibility. Although often justified as protective measures, this regulation frequently renders women more vulnerable and enforces obedience to patriarchal standards.

The physical manifestation of pregnancy, the expanding uterus accommodating fetal growth, provides a visual cue that often serves as an unspoken

invitation for engagement from others, including strangers, who feel entitled to offer advice or initiate physical contact. Robyn Longhurst’s research on “pregnant embodiment” (34) demonstrates how the maternal body becomes public property, subject to unsolicited touching and commentary that would be considered inappropriate in virtually any other context. Unlike other medical conditions, pregnancy exists in both private and public spheres, subject to scrutiny and even criminalization in ways that other medical decisions are not. Cynthia Daniels documents how pregnant women’s consumption choices—whether coffee, alcohol, or certain foods—become sites of public intervention and judgment (9–30). This surveillance extends to legal realms as well. Lynn M. Paltrow and Jeanne Flavin’s comprehensive study identifies over four hundred cases between 1973 and 2005 where women were arrested, detained, or forced to undergo medical interventions based on actions during pregnancy. More recently, an Amnesty International 2024 report on United States (US) abortion protections for women details documented cases where women have faced criminal charges for miscarriages or stillbirths when authorities suspected drug use contributed to fetal harm. The “reasonable person” standard typically applied in medical decision-making is frequently driven by maternal sacrifice expectations, where pregnant women are expected to prioritize fetal interests above their autonomy, comfort, or personal health needs (Roberts)—a standard rarely applied to other individuals making personal health decisions.

Thus, pregnancy encompasses a unique combination of medical, physical, and cultural aspects. The visibility of the pregnant body creates a distinct social experience where the boundaries between private medical experience and public social engagement become permeable. This public dimension of pregnancy extends beyond casual social interactions and into professional environments, where pregnant bodies become subject to additional layers of scrutiny, assumptions, and often implicit biases about competence and commitment that can significantly affect women’s career trajectories and workplace experiences.

Pregnancy and Work

Women’s participation in the US labour force has been climbing since World War II (32.7 per cent of US women over sixteen years) to a current high of 57.3 per cent in 2024 (US Bureau of Labor Statistics). Currently, there are 74.6 million women in the civilian labour force in the US, representing 47 per cent of American workers (US Bureau of Labor Statistics). Despite a growing presence in the workforce, women continue to occupy fewer managerial and authority positions than men (US GAO). Decades-long declines in female representation in STEM-related fields have continued while women’s overrepresentation in the lowest-paying occupations (i.e., education, health-

care, and service) continues (Dewolfe; Kochhar). Additionally, the gendered pay gap blankets employment across disciplines: “In 2022, women with at least a bachelor’s degree earned 79% as much as men who were college graduates, and women who were high school graduates earned 81% as much as men without the same level of education” (Kochhar; US Bureau of Labor).

While the employment divide in occupation and wage is shaped by external pressures, such as cultural and economic factors, Joan Acker’s seminal research suggests women’s workforce challenges are a function of the gendered nature of the organizations themselves. Previous explanations of women’s failed professional advancement relied on assumptions that organizations are built upon two hierarchical systems: bureaucracy (i.e., policy, structure, and command) and patriarchy. Women’s lack of advancement was the result of failure within these two systems. Yet Acker challenged the premise that any part of the organization (e.g., the bureaucracy) can be gender neutral: “Gender is not an addition to ongoing processes ... rather, it is an integral part of those processes” (146). As evidence, Acker draws attention to how gender is embedded and reproduced in organizations through normative daily practices, organizational values, expectations, and assumptions. These organizational logics guide the evaluation and organization of everyday activities and frame the masculine ethic as preferred, right, normal, and superior. Thus, organizational logics create a “gendered substructure that is reproduced daily in practical work activities ... in written work rules, labor contracts, managerial directives, and other documentary tools for running large organizations” (Acker 147). Thus, gender neutrality is an illusion that masks how organizational processes privilege masculine traits as the ideal worker who is completely devoted to work, has minimal outside responsibilities, and can prioritize job demands above all else. Joan Williams extends Acker’s premise to include organizations’ expectations of employee dedication impeding family involvement. Workers are encouraged (expected) to hide, minimize, and make invisible any evidence of other roles, particularly roles perceived to conflict with employee responsibilities. Thus, demands for ideal workers not only demand intense and disrupted attention to work duties but also create difficulties in other, nonwork areas of life, as work “leaves little time for workers to invest substantial energy or time in their family lives” (Solomon 341).

Pregnancy, however, violates the illusion of organization as a gendered-neutral space supported by equally unencumbered, disembodied workers. Just as pregnant embodiment (Oliver 761) disrupts conventional understandings of bodily boundaries and autonomy, it represents a visible deviation from the disembodied, gender-neutral ideal worker that organizations often demand.

Pregnancy in Higher Education

The climate for women balancing motherhood and pregnancy within higher education is equally challenging. While US universities are subject to the same protections for pregnant and caregiving employees mentioned earlier, they are often rated worse than corporate workplaces by their employees regarding access to helpful work-family policies (Anderson et al.). Work-family policies such as parental leave (Family and Medical Leave Act), reduced teaching or service load, childcare subsidies, and stopping the tenure clock are most frequent within US higher institutions. However, these options are challenged as ineffective, exclusionary, and unhelpful, potentially negatively affecting women's career trajectories (Antecol et al.; Fox and Gaughan; Mason et al.). Furthermore, some faculty forgo using available policies, particularly female faculty who are junior and unpublished, for fear of negative perceptions by colleagues or potential future consequences (Carter; Maxwell et al.; Shauman et al.).

Additionally, faculty life presents a unique set of expectations and responsibilities. For instance, conference travel, often requiring extended nights away from home and personal cost, is important during the tenure and promotion process, as it serves as an opportunity to connect with other faculty, receive feedback and gain recognition in the scholarly community (Mata et al.). The extremely competitive nature of securing tenure-track positions often requires sacrifices in one's personal life (Mason et al.; Misra et al.), such as working evenings or missing family obligations. Forty-four per cent of faculty mothers and 34 per cent of faculty fathers reported missing some of their child's important events because they did not want to appear uncommitted to their work (Colbeck and Drago 13). Not surprisingly, among men and women tenure-track professors, fewer than 36 per cent of women and 44 per cent of men viewed tenure-track careers as family-friendly (Cech and Blair-Loy; Rhoads and Rhoads), as faculty members cannot participate in conferences or professional activities due to absent or inadequate child care (Tower and Latimer).

Akin to corporate environments, the academic setting has little room for scholars who cannot (or choose not to) perform as ideal workers. This tension is amplified for pregnant faculty who openly challenge disembodiment, as they “cannot conceal her body or maintain an impenetrable firewall between the public and private spheres of her life” (Ollilainen 962).

Marjukka Ollilainen's study explores the convergence of ideal worker ideals and pregnancy in academia; her description of conversations with pregnant faculty members identify the “inherent conflict between the pregnant body and the ideal academic worker expectations [which] began to emerge as the women talked about hiding their bodies at work, managing their self-presentation as ‘pregnant professor’ with supra-performance” (967). Ollilainen's

work references “embodied interactions,” where students and colleagues react to faculty members’ pregnancies (973). The pregnant body, as a visual reminder of life outside the classroom and academy, served as an invitation to others (e.g., students and colleagues) to ask questions or comment on faculty members’ health and maternal plans.

These communicative exchanges between pregnant faculty and their students are powerful and meaningful, as “humans come to make sense of their lives through communication” (Koenig Kellas and Kranstuber Horstman 80) and can play a significant role in pregnant faculty members’ understanding of the rules and expectations within the university context. From this perspective, the comments pregnant faculty members receive during interactions with others offer an avenue for exploring the socialization process and policing of norms within an organization, like the ideal worker. Furthermore, as communication conveys, reinforces, and shapes workplace culture, these messages provide insight into the continued gendered attrition of female faculty, as they remain more likely to depart academia than men at every stage of their careers (LaBerge et al.; Spoon, et al.).

Memorable Messages

Memorable messages represent a significant area of inquiry in communication research, as they can profoundly shape individuals’ perceptions, decisions, and behaviours. First conceptualized by Mark L. Knapp et al., memorable messages share several key characteristics: They are typically brief, personally meaningful to recipients, and often follow simple conditional (“if then”) structures. Recipients feel personally connected to the topic, so the messages are meaningful, influential and remembered for long periods. These messages are particularly relevant during periods of transition, as they provide a frame for interpreting experiences and guide responses.

In organizational contexts, these memorable messages differ from casual workplace communication in their lasting impact; messages become reference points for employees when facing challenges or making decisions, often serving as informal socialization mechanisms that complement formal organizational policies and training programs (Holladay; Stohl).

Previous research on memorable messages in academic settings has been minimal, with most work focussing on student transition and success in higher education contexts. For university employees, memorable message literature is even more scarce, as it only addresses faculty issues, such as newcomer transition (Dallimore), inclusion for minority groups (Lemus et al.), or classroom interactions (Garland and Violanti).

Memorable messages from students—whether supportive, inappropriate, or ambivalent—carry implications for how pregnant faculty perceive their roles as educators, mothers, and women in higher education spaces. These

interactions are not only reflections of cultural attitudes towards pregnant professionals but also serve as microsites of meaning-making, influencing how women understand and perform their dual identities. By exploring these moments, this study contributes to the literature on academic motherhood, identity negotiation, and the social shaping of maternal experiences across the life course. Therefore, this study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. Do faculty members recall memorable messages surrounding their pregnancy from their students?

RQ2. What themes emerge from the messages recalled from female faculty members?

Methods

Participants

The target population for the study consisted of female faculty members in tenure and tenure-track positions who experienced a pregnancy while employed at their US college or university. Faculty members not currently in tenure or tenure-track positions, as well as those currently serving in administrative (e.g., provost and dean) positions, were excluded from the study.

Potential participants were recruited through snowball sampling, as well as through advertisements on social media platforms. Interested participants were asked to forward the study advertisement to their networks and others who fit the participation parameters. This recruitment method was a cost-effective way to reach those meeting the necessary sample characteristics.

Instruments

After acknowledging their consent and confirming their match with the study's participation parameters, participants completed an online survey via Qualtrics regarding their experiences as a female faculty member. The questionnaire consisted of several demographic items, such as family characteristics, identity, and employment descriptors.

To invite recall of memorable messages, participants were provided with a description of memorable messages:

Memorable messages are communication moments shared between individuals that offer insight, advice, or even expectations for behaviour in the academic and family environments. Sometimes these messages are stories; others are quick sayings. Memorable messages can be cautionary (e.g., “Big decisions get made in the hallways; don't ever close your office door”) or offer examples of success (e.g., “Smart researchers find a way to say ‘yes’ more than ‘no’”). Most importantly, these memorable messages are memorable to listeners and can influence one's understanding of how to be successful.

Participants were invited to share any message they received from students about their pregnancy.

Coding

The study employed reflective thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, *Thematic*) to analyze participant responses, embracing a constructivist epistemology that prioritizes meaning over mere repetition in the data. Following Virginia Braun and Victoria Clark's recursive six-step process, coders first familiarize themselves with the data through multiple readings of all responses. Initial coding uses participants' own words to create short descriptive labels, which are subsequently combined to identify common ideas within memorable pregnancy messages. These codes are then reviewed, grouped by shared meanings, and developed into themes that provide coherent patterns, contributing to the data's overall narrative. The generated themes are designed to offer internally consistent perspectives while avoiding redundancy, ultimately providing interpretative insights that capture important aspects of the research question. This approach acknowledges that themes do not simply emerge from data but are actively interpreted by researchers based on meaningfulness rather than predefined categories, creating what Braun and Clark describe as "meaning-based interpretive stories" ("Conceptual" 2).

Positionality

A central tenet of reflective thematic analysis is the researcher's perspective, as researchers inevitably bring assumptions about reality and knowledge production, even when unstated (Braun and Clark, *Thematic*). This reflexivity requires a purposeful assessment of how personal views influence data interpretation. As a tenured faculty member and mother of three, the author's interest stems from personal experience: balancing tenure with a toddler, experiencing pregnancy without institutional support, and later witnessing administrative resistance to providing paid leave for fellow faculty members. These experiences revealed systemic gaps affecting pregnant academics and shaped the author's worldview. However, the author's position as a cis heterosexual, white woman with a partner who works outside academia limits perspective and understanding. Minority women continue to be under-represented and marginalized in academic environments (Vasquez Heilig et al.), and the current study is no exception.

Results

Three hundred and sixty-eight participants began the survey as part of a larger data collection on academic motherhood; 172 participants indicated they had experienced a pregnancy sometime during their employment as a tenure or tenure-track faculty member. These participants (N=172) were the focus of the

current study.

The majority of participants (N=105; 61 per cent) were tenured associate professors working in public (four-year) institutions of higher education. Sixty-two participants were employed at (four-year) private colleges or universities (36 per cent). Two-year degree-granting institutions and other academic institutions accounted for less than 3 per cent (N=5) of participant employment. Sixty-two per cent of respondents (N=107) held faculty positions with expectations for balanced service, teaching, and research; participants with primarily teaching (13 per cent) or research (9 per cent) assignments were also represented. Thirteen participants (7 per cent) described their faculty positions as dominated by other expectations; common descriptors included mentions of graduate faculty positions, service commitments, or mentoring.

Participants were encouraged to select any, all, or none of the categories that best reflected their identities; a large majority of respondents (N=138; 80 per cent) identified as white (e.g., German, Irish, English, Italian, and Polish). Latino/a/x, Hispanic, Spanish (5 per cent), Asian (8 per cent), Middle Eastern (2 per cent), American Indian, or Alaskan Native (2 per cent), and Black, African American (2 per cent) categories were also selected. One participant preferred not to say, and eight participants did not respond to this item. Participants were invited to describe their family and household environments by selecting all or various descriptors; a large number of respondents identified as living in a married or domestic partnership (N=146; 85 per cent), with 5 per cent of respondents indicating relational divorce or separation (N=9). Six participants preferred not to answer this item (3 per cent). Single, widowed, cohabiting with relatives, multigenerational, adoptive or foster, LGBTQ+, and other households were also represented.

Memorable Messages from Students

Sixty-five respondents (38 per cent) were able to recall 70 distinct messages from students or in classroom settings. Seven entries stating “no messages” or “none” were not included in the results. Analysis of these recalled messages revealed several distinct themes characterizing student responses to faculty pregnancies. These themes illuminate the complex dynamics at play when female faculty members navigate pregnancy within academic environments. The following sections present these themes with representative examples from participants’ recalled messages.

Concerns about Academic Impact

For many faculty members, student comments captured how students prioritize their own needs. When confronted with their professor’s pregnancy, students’ messages centred around how the pregnancy would affect their own educational experience, class schedule, or academic support. On the surface

self-protective, these student comments demonstrate a tension between acknowledging the personal circumstances of their professor (i.e., pregnancy) and focussing on potential disruptions to their academic trajectory.

Direct and blunt reactions from students regarding the impact of pregnancy on class were common among the recalled messages, such as “Ugh. What will happen with our class?” or “Please don’t get pregnant and leave us again!” Other participants offered a summary of the multiple questions they received throughout the semester: “[I received] questions about when I would be gone and when I would be coming back (i.e., how my pregnancy would impact their learning/advising).” Faculty involved with graduate programs reported similar reactions from their advisees and graduate students, who seemed particularly concerned with their access to the faculty during leave. For example, one participant recalled an interaction with her assigned graduate advisee, who asked: “Will you still be able to mentor while out on maternity leave?” In some cases, recalled student messages indicated that a faculty member’s pregnancy (and subsequent leave) was a perceived violation of the advisor-advisee relationship. One faculty member, who chose to delay disclosure about her pregnancy due to health issues, shared her graduate student’s reaction to the pregnancy news: “I feel betrayed that you didn’t tell me.” Rather than offering congratulations or support, these direct inquiries exemplify students’ immediate turn towards self-interest. Another participant noted that while “students were supportive, their main concern was also how and whether my pregnancy would negatively affect them,” highlighting the conditional nature of student support.

The impact of these students’ concerns on their outcomes extended to formal evaluations of teaching effectiveness. As one respondent shared: “I had a course eval submitted the semester I had my second child that criticized the course simply because they had to do a hybrid learning situation, which was explained and communicated over and over so students knew it was going to happen.” Perhaps most strikingly, another faculty member reported: “My students gave me the worst teaching evaluations of my life because I was ‘gone too much.’ I delivered my baby in the middle of September. They could see that I was very pregnant the first day of class.”

Students also used teaching evaluations to critique faculty bodies, suggesting that the pregnant body can disrupt student learning.

I had students write in negative comments about my pregnancy. Things like, “it made me uncomfortable when the baby would move,” “it was like the movie *Alien*,” “I couldn’t concentrate, I thought she was going to have the baby in class.” I’m short and so I had a very large, round belly. Students definitely looked and stared and ironically made me uncomfortable. They stared. And there was that one student who was disgusted. And they all wanted me to go into labour early so that class would be over.

Recalled messages from students reveal a fundamental tension in how students navigate their professor's pregnancy. Rather than viewing faculty as whole individuals with lives beyond academia, students often prioritize their educational interests when responding to pregnancy disclosures. This reveals an underlying transactional view of the faculty-student relationship, where students perceive pregnancy and subsequent leave as a potential breach of educational contract rather than a natural life event. These reactions manifest in direct questioning, negative teaching evaluations, and expressions of discomfort with the pregnant body itself and suggest deeper issues around expectations of faculty availability and institutional accommodation.

Embodied Disruption in Academic Spaces

The pregnant professor's body creates a unique form of disruption in academic environments, where faculty bodies are typically rendered invisible or irrelevant to intellectual work. Student responses reveal a spectrum of emotional and social reactions to this disruption, exposing deeper cultural assumptions about the appropriate boundaries between personal and professional identities in academic spaces.

Many participants reported genuinely positive responses from students who embraced the news with enthusiasm. One faculty member recalled: “They clapped and cheered when I shared that I was expecting my second child. It was wonderful!” In some cases, students actively demonstrated their support through celebratory gestures: “They even threw a ‘baby shower’ and brought donuts and pizza to class a few weeks before I had my son.” Another professor noted the thoughtfulness of students who sent her personalized emails to congratulate her when they heard the news: “They were incredibly patient with changes to scheduled meetings and such. They were wonderful.”

However, these positive responses often reframed the professor's identity concerning traditional gender roles. Students' reactions sometimes shifted attention from the professor's academic position to their impending maternal role: “You're going to be a good mom” and “Would love to meet your kids.” Even supportive comments frequently emphasized the professor's changing body: “My students would comment on how ‘cute’ I looked with my bump” and “A student waiting after class to ask me where I got my maternity clothes because they were ‘adorable.’” These responses, while well-intentioned, highlight how pregnancy makes visible aspects of identity that typically remain outside academic interactions.

In contrast, faculty also encountered reactions characterized by discomfort or aversion. Some students expressed their unease directly: “It's so weird to have a pregnant professor.” Others reacted with visible disapproval or objectification, commenting directly on the pregnant body: “One student told me that she didn't want to have kids because she was afraid that her arms

would get fat, but because my arms seemed to be the same size as before my pregnancy, that maybe it would be ok.” One faculty member recalled encountering “a student who felt I looked too ‘ill’ to teach while heavily pregnant,” while another reported their students asking anxious questions, such as “What if your water breaks during class?” These reactions position the pregnant body as inappropriate for or unsettling in academic spaces. One professor even experienced a student’s jarring assertion that “There’s nothing natural about a pregnant woman” during a class discussion, suggesting deep discomfort with the biological reality of maternity in professional settings.

The visceral and emotional nature of these responses suggests that pregnancy introduces an embodied reality into academic spaces that students are unaccustomed to experiencing. These concerns reveal how the pregnant body introduces biological unpredictability into educational environments structured around pattern and hierarchy. This tension between celebration and discomfort demonstrates how the pregnant body is a site of contested meaning in academic spaces, thus highlighting the institutional norms of work-life separation.

Perceptions of Professional Capacity and Authority

Pregnancy also prompted students to question, reassess, or challenge female faculty members’ professional competence and authority. These messages reveal an underlying assumption that pregnancy and motherhood might be incompatible with academic roles and responsibilities.

Direct questioning of pregnant faculty’s capabilities emerged in comments, such as “Are you sure you can teach and be pregnant?” suggesting an inherent conflict between these two roles. This sentiment extended beyond the pregnancy itself, as evidenced by one participant who noted, “A student expressed surprise that I would continue teaching after the baby was born,” revealing assumptions about the incompatibility of motherhood with academic careers. Faculty also reported experiencing diminished professional standing, for example, “I had a student be suspicious that I would be a good professor.” These perceptions sometimes led faculty to alter their behaviour preemptively, as one participant explained: “I deliberately did not tell my students I was pregnant until nearly the end of the semester (when I was more clearly showing). I think I felt an unspoken sense that telling them would undermine my authority in the classroom, but I think this came more from me than from them.” This reflection highlights how internalized concerns about professional perception influenced disclosure decisions.

Some faculty experienced infantilization or were treated with excessive caution, as one respondent described: “Sometimes treated me like I was fragile or hysterical. Like their grades or unavoidable changes in the schedule (e.g., due to snow days) were about my pregnancy.” This account illustrates how

students reinterpreted routine academic occurrences through the lens of pregnancy, attributing normal educational circumstances to the professor's pregnant condition, thereby undermining her professional authority.

Pregnancy visibility also led to unsolicited concerns about faculty members' physical capabilities to perform routine teaching activities. One participant recalled, “Do you need a chair for teaching?” while another mentioned students who “would suggest I sit down to teach.” Although potentially well-intentioned, these suggestions position the pregnant professor as physically compromised and in need of accommodation, subtly challenging her professional self-determination and autonomy. Similarly, another faculty member described a discussion over the appropriate methods of transportation while pregnant, as the students suggested “renting a car and driving back to campus,” even though she had no problem flying while pregnant. This example illustrates how students may overestimate limitations or impose unnecessary caution that undermines faculty authority to make professional judgments.

Faculty members often felt compelled to demonstrate their continued professional competence during pregnancy. One participant highlighted this pressure when describing returning to teaching just two weeks postpartum: “They were surprised to see me back two weeks after I had one of my babies, who was born mid-semester. We had no leave policy, so I had no choice but to go back in and work. Very sad.” This experience reveals how institutional structures may exacerbate student perceptions by failing to normalize pregnancy and parental leave as expected events within academic careers.

For pregnant faculty, these challenges to professional authority create additional labour beyond their regular academic responsibilities. Not only must they perform their roles effectively, but they must also counter assumptions about their diminished capacity and justify their continued presence in academic spaces. This pattern reveals how pregnancy transitions from personal occasion to professional liability in environments where embodied female experiences remain marginalized or viewed as incompatible with academic positions.

Discussion

This study's findings illustrate how student responses to faculty pregnancy are not merely casual chatter but can become memorable messages, or communicative events that are recalled over time and shape how women in academia make sense of their lives as mothers and professionals (Knapp et al.; Fuller). For many participants, these messages were emotionally charged and enduring, signifying their role not only as educators but as visible representations of motherhood within the academy. For women in academia, the gendered balancing act between pregnancy and work is tumultuous, as it challenges

ideal worker norms with visual markers of outside responsibilities. In short, pregnant women cannot hide their other lives while walking the halls of the academy.

Across all themes, participants described student reactions that were unexpected, emotionally salient, and enduring, with many professors recalling specific words or interactions years later. For instance, supportive messages, such as “You’ll be a great mom!”, or celebratory gestures, such as classroom baby showers, became affirming reference points in participants’ narratives, often reinforcing their sense of belonging in academic and maternal spheres. Conversely, judgmental or critical remarks, such as “She shouldn’t be teaching in that condition,” or course evaluations that blamed the professor’s pregnancy for perceived academic disruption, became memorable in a negative sense, amplifying feelings of exclusion and discomfort. These findings extend the literature on memorable messages by demonstrating how even casual student remarks can shape how women view their competence, credibility, and emotional safety during a highly visible and transitional life stage. This discussion highlights the implications of these communicative interactions for sensemaking, identity, and the ideal worker norm for pregnant female faculty.

Making Sense and Identity

Participants engaged in complex sensemaking processes as they interpreted student messages within wider institutional norms. From the perspective of sensemaking, “who we think we are (identity) as organizational actors shapes what we enact and how we interpret, which affects what outsiders think we are (image) and how they treat us, which stabilizes or destabilizes our identity. Who we are lies importantly in the hands of others” (Weick et al. 416). Faculty did not passively absorb student comments; they actively interpreted them in light of their values, status within the university, and perceived risks. Participants reflected on how student responses either affirmed or complicated their maternal and professional identities. For some, student excitement and ongoing interest in their children helped them integrate motherhood into their academic self-concept. These women described feeling seen not only as professors but as mothers, suggesting that positive messages supported a more holistic sense of self. In this way, supportive messages show that motherhood and professionalism could coexist, potentially bolstering confidence and agency. For these faculty members, positive interactions with students helped normalize mothering in professional spaces and often became sources of strength (O’Reilly; Laffey et al.).

However, critical or negative feedback yielded a defensive sensemaking process, with participants interpreting these moments as cues to manage impressions, withhold personal information, or reassert their professional competence as parts of their identity affected by others’ messages (Tracy and

Trethewey). In these cases, faculty recalled feeling scrutinized or isolated, and some described strategic concealment of pregnancy or feelings of betrayal from students who learned about it late. For instance, one faculty member delayed revealing her pregnancy until visibly showing, due to concerns about losing authority, reflecting the requirement for pregnant faculty to "read the room" and manage impressions in the classroom. This sensemaking process, and the understanding that pregnancy in academic spaces requires impression management of dual roles, is important. This recognition offers insight into the complex multidimensional lived experiences of academic mothers, particularly during this life transition, affirming KerryAnn O'Meara and Corbin M. Campbell's conclusion: "In most cases, the physical aspects of pregnancy, child-birth, and breastfeeding made women feel that they had fewer choices in achieving work/family balance" (470). Even well-intended physical monitoring messages, such as concerns about health or capability, could reinforce gendered expectations about fragility and maternal precarity, leading some faculty to reconsider how much of their personal lives should be visible in the classroom (Crabb and Ekberg; Enns and Sinacore).

Ideal Workers

The reactions of students also illuminate how deeply embedded the ideal worker norm remains in higher education (Acker; Ward and Wolf-Wendel). This ideal presumes constant availability, emotional neutrality, and disembodied professionalism—expectations fundamentally challenged by the visible, physical, and time-bound realities of pregnancy.

Comments celebrating the pregnancy or expressing admiration for the professor's ability to balance academic and maternal roles contributed to a sense of legitimacy and inclusion. These types of messages, offering encouragement or recognizing their capacity to "do it all," helped these women to understand themselves through the life course as mothers and scholars. Conversely, messages communicating anxiety about academic disruption and objectification of the pregnant body reflected the ongoing tensions arising when motherhood enters professional contexts that have historically privileged disembodied, masculine norms of labour (Acker; Ward and Wolf-Wendel). Comments like "Will you still be able to mentor while on leave?" or evaluations linking reduced course quality to pregnancy suggested that faculty who become mothers must defend their legitimacy against assumptions of decreased productivity or commitment (Lester). Messages questioning the faculty member's reliability and assumed selfishness for taking leave or expressing unease at the physical realities of pregnancy revealed how student expectations are entangled in institutional logics that can marginalize caregiving identities (Lester). Even well-meaning offers to "sit down and rest" imply an expectation of diminished capacity, which contrasts starkly with expectations of tireless

availability framed by ideal worker standards. In this way, the recalled messages show how students can become enforcers of normative professional ideals that unconsciously mirror institutional norms and view caregiving as a disruption rather than part of the life course.

Conclusion

This study highlights the unique role students play in shaping how pregnant faculty experience and make sense of motherhood throughout their careers. These findings underscore how messages shape identity formation (Armenti; O'Reilly). Pregnancy, an intensely embodied and visible phase of mothering, is not only a private experience but a public and communicatively constructed event that reverberates across personal and professional arenas. The recalled messages from students offer insight into how mothering in academia is simultaneously celebrated, scrutinized, supported, and surveilled with imprints that endure beyond the pregnancy itself. Furthermore, student comments during a professor's pregnancy function as more than fleeting remarks; they are memorable messages that become central to how women in academia make sense of their professional and maternal identities. By examining the content and impact of these messages, this research sheds light on the cultural expectations, institutional culture, and identity negotiations that shape mothering through the life course in higher education. It also emphasizes the importance of creating communicative and structural conditions that affirm, rather than constrain, the complex identities of academic mothers.

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My Body, Whose Choice? Or How I Learned about Righteous Mom Rage

Through an autoethnographic account of fertility treatments, pregnancy, and motherhood, this article reflects on women's rights and bodily autonomy in the context of recent political events in the United States (US). While sharing her experience with fertility treatments, detailing the physical and emotional toll of IVF, the author reflects on the difficulty of facing this process and her longing for motherhood. The political backdrop of the US Supreme Court's decision to overturn Roe v. Wade fuelled rage and anxiety in her, as she grapples with legal implications for her bodily autonomy and medical care during pregnancy. Abortion is healthcare, and the outlawing of healthcare for women can have dire consequences. Anger and rage have empowered women's rights movements, and feminist writers have discussed the power of women's rage as a catalyst for social change. bell hooks and Mona Eltahawy, among other feminist scholars, explain that women need to reclaim their anger as a form of empowerment. This autoethnography critiques the US political landscape that undermines human rights and healthcare, advocating for embracing rage to enact systemic change for everyone's autonomy and wellbeing.

Looking at my backside in the bathroom mirror, I try to find a place for my intramuscular shots of progesterone. After finding out I am allergic to most formulations, I have large welts and bruises across the top, muscular part of my ass. The needle for these shots looks like it is straight out of a horror movie; it is big and long. I struggle to pull the thick, viscous liquid into the needle slowly because that is the only way to draw up this hormone set in thick oil. And then I struggle more to push the liquid into my body because it is so thick, and my body is bearing the results of my allergies. It is May 2022, and I have been injecting myself with hormones and drugs for over four weeks, twice daily, to retrieve eggs for in vitro fertilization. I never thought I would be in this position, and I never thought I would be doing it alone. The first egg

retrieval I had, my spouse was home, and he would give me the shots that had to be administered on my backside. He drove with me to the many appointments, but this time, he is not here, having been deployed to Saudi Arabia, a country that has just recently given women the right to drive.

Gestating Rage

I think a lot about women's rights these days. The US Supreme Court statement for the Dobbs case overturning *Roe v. Wade* was leaked in April 2022; it looked like rights for women's health care would be stripped away because the statement would overturn the right for women and their doctors to be able to decide when to have an abortion. Medical experts tried to argue that abortion is essential healthcare; the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists published a message that "Abortion is essential health care." Experts in the field were ignored as ignorance about women's bodies and healthcare has grown, making pregnancy and bodily autonomy a political issue rather than a moral healthcare one. Even knowing that I might lose all rights to my body once I was pregnant, I still went through another egg retrieval and one more embryo transfer. I had been trying to have a baby for four years by this point and was seeing a fertility specialist the whole time. My husband and I wanted kids, and we have wound up trying everything. We have fostered, tried public and private adoption, and sought fertility treatment. I do not know that I can explain my urge to want to raise children, but I am now in my mid-forties, and I want kids. I would say "at any cost," but the cost is about thirty thousand for IVF and upwards of forty to fifty thousand to adopt. And the cost is also years of emotional turmoil, as I ride various hormone rollercoasters, and as I have had my fifth miscarriage. Five miscarriages, and I was trying again. That is how badly I wanted to be a mom and raise children.

In March 2022, the Missouri House of Representatives debated a trigger law to go into effect if *Roe v. Wade* was overturned. HB 2810, which would put doctors at risk of being charged with a class A or class B felony if "the abortion was performed or induced or was attempted to be performed or induced on a woman who has an ectopic pregnancy" (Campoamor). As lawmakers debated the bill, a lot of confusion arose about what an ectopic pregnancy is. An ectopic pregnancy occurs when an embryo implants somewhere in a woman's body that is not the uterus and grows and develops. But as Danielle Campoamor explains, "An ectopic pregnancy is 100% fatal if untreated, and never, ever results in a baby. Yet it's a common target in anti-abortion legislation." Because the gestational sack (i.e., the fertilized egg) implants and grows in an organ that cannot expand and nurture the baby, not having an abortion will lead to rupture of the woman's organs. No baby can ever come from an ectopic pregnancy.

A quick Google search reveals that this medical complication is the leading cause of death for women in the first trimester. According to Kellie Mullany et. al., “Ectopic pregnancy (EP) ruptures are the leading cause of maternal mortality within the first trimester of pregnancy” (1). Lawmakers are not doctors, but these assholes did not even do their homework before writing the bill. The trigger law that went into effect and is still in effect (even after Missouri voters voted in November 2024 to have abortion protected in the Missouri state constitution) does not contain the original statement about ectopic pregnancy. However, the vague statement about medical emergencies as a cause for abortion and the strict penalty for doctors meant that medical professionals were scrambling to interpret the law and save their patients from having their organs rupture or, worse yet, waiting for ruptured organs before performing an abortion.

On 22 May 2022, I had five eggs retrieved. Three days later, I had three fresh embryos implanted. I am going to stop here for a second to recognize that this terminology is indeed unusual. “Fresh embryos” makes it sound as if they can spoil, but the medical profession calls them “fresh” as opposed to a “frozen embryo” transfer. Three was unusual, but each of my embryos was developing at a slightly different rate; they were in three different stages. Yes, I now know more about embryos than any typical English professor. I could probably bring in diagrams and give lectures about embryos, pregnancy, and women’s fertility. Partly that is because I am a researcher: I dive in and learn and consume information. I always want to learn.

Less than a month after my embryo transfer, on 24 June 2022, I was pregnant, and the US Supreme Court case *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* overturned *Roe v. Wade*. Immediately, several states had trigger legislation that banned abortion (including my current home state of Missouri). I do not think I can fully explain the terror I felt being pregnant and knowing that if I had any medical complications—my little ball of cells, not even an embryo yet—would have more rights over my body than I do at any nearby hospital or medical facility. According to RSMO 188.017, titled “Right to Life of the Unborn Child Act”:

Notwithstanding any other provision of law to the contrary, no abortion shall be performed or induced upon a woman, except in cases of medical emergency. Any person who knowingly performs or induces an abortion of an unborn child in violation of this subsection shall be guilty of a class B felony, as well as subject to suspension or revocation of his or her professional license by his or her professional licensing board. A woman upon whom an abortion is performed or induced in violation of this subsection shall not be prosecuted for a conspiracy to violate the provisions of this subsection.

I was terrified, and I was angry. My doctors and I would no longer have the right to my medical decisions for my body once I was pregnant. I remain angry; my rage is actually boiling over at all times at this rate. And I am not exaggerating here. Stories were quickly sweeping news stations of women with ectopic pregnancies who were being denied abortions until they were in critical condition in Missouri.

After the Supreme Court ruling, in a *Missouri Independent* news article from July 2, 2022, reporters Tessa Weinberg and Allison Kite discuss when abortions are permitted: “The procedure is only permitted in a medical emergency, which state law defines as necessary to save the patient’s life or ‘for which a delay will create a serious risk of substantial and irreversible physical impairment of a major bodily function of the pregnant woman.’” Doctors’ concerns about being charged with a class B felony and losing their licenses over providing an abortion were affecting healthcare decisions and damaging women’s bodies. Weinberg and Kite interviewed Jeannie Kelly, a maternal-fetal medicine specialist at Washington University in St. Louis and the medical director of labour and delivery, who explained that doctors “may need to terminate a pregnancy in cases of uterine infection, hemorrhaging, ectopic pregnancies or severe preeclampsia—all conditions that can result in death or irreversible harm.” But how to determine if a pregnancy and its complications might result in irreversible harm was being left in the hands of elected officials with little to no understanding of medical care and a legal system filled with people trained in law, not medicine or the female reproductive system. Medical experts began publishing about how healthcare professionals can try to help protect abortion access for patients (Fay et al).

My first sigh of relief was when I found out that my embryo had implanted in my uterus, and I would not have to potentially face having an organ rupture if I did not get a medically necessary abortion, which I might have to find someone to take me out of state to get. I want to stress again that my chosen life partner, the person who has driven me home from a medically necessary abortion at a nearby hospital, was serving our country, wearing a flag and uniform for a country that does not acknowledge my bodily autonomy or the expertise of doctors. We wanted to have a baby, not have me end up in an ICU or die. During this time, to distract myself from the country that was quickly filling me with rage, I started to turn to reading feminist texts and women’s stories to try to understand and make meaning of my experiences.

Procreating Rage

In 2006, the MeToo movement began collective action for women who were victims of sexual violence, sexual harassment, and rape culture, and this expanded with the use of #MeToo in 2017 to demonstrate the magnitude of

the problem. When Donald Trump first became president in 2017, the Women's March took place the day after his inauguration. Between the Women's March and the rise of #MeToo, followed closely by similar movements, including #MosqueMeToo and #IBeatMyAssaulter in 2018, women wrote a plethora of books about the transformative power of rage. This was a similar kind of rage that bell hooks writes about in *Killing Rage*:

Confronting my rage, witnessing the way it moved me to grow and change, I understood intimately that it had the potential not only to destroy but also to construct. Then and now I understand rage to be a necessary aspect of resistance struggle. Rage can act as a catalyst inspiring courageous action. By demanding that black people repress and annihilate our rage to assimilate, to reap the benefits of material privilege in white supremacist capitalist patriarchal culture, white folks urge us to remain complicit with their efforts to colonize, oppress, and exploit. (16)

hooks explains how important rage is to social change, and to deny ourselves rage in the face of subjugation is to become complicit in our subjugation and the subjugation of others.

It is not a secret that the majority of medical care and scientific research has historically focussed on male bodies, often at the expense of women. But the way this neglect affects women and intersects within patriarchy is yet another aspect causing my rage. I read the memoir *Hysterical* by Elissa Bassist, in which she details her search for help with bodily pain and health issues, finding no answers until she sees a therapist who suggests her issues are caused by unexpressed rage. Soraya Chemaly argues in *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women's Anger* that women are taught to suppress their anger due to gender norms; however, we should express our rage because it is productive. Throughout US history, the subjugated and oppressed have been taught to suppress their anger and rage. As Bassist chronicles, unexpressed rage hurts and kills. In *All the Rage: Mothers, Fathers, and the Myth of Equal Partnership*, Darcy Lockman discusses how mothers end up carrying more of the workload when it comes to children. Studies on cognitive load and other household duties that typically fall on women demonstrate that the gender divisions of labour still affect women more harshly than men. In Minna Durbin's more recent book *Mom Rage: The Everyday Crisis of Modern Motherhood*, she outlines how women cannot possibly live up to society's ideals of what a mother should be. Motherhood is a joy and a privilege. I feel lucky that I have been able to have my children and to have carried and given birth to my youngest, especially. But I am also just so fucking angry at the world I have brought her into and what it has become and seems to be becoming.

Rebecca Traister chronicles how rage has shaped American women's

political struggles in her book *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger*. Traister claims that “While we in the United States may not have been told the stories, our nation, too, has been transformed by women’s anger—in response not just to sexism, but also to racism, homophobia, capitalist excess, to the many inequities to which women and those around them have been exposed” (xix). What has become clear to me in my growing feelings of rage—which have only been amplified by being a mother and giving birth to a daughter and losing my right to my bodily autonomy for the span of my pregnancy—is that rage is a power we need to embrace and embody for social and political change.

In *The Seven Necessary Sins of Women and Girls*, Mona Eltahawy presents “the seven necessary sins women and girls need to employ to defy, disobey, and disrupt the patriarchy: anger, attention, profanity, ambition, power, violence, and lust” (10). Eltahawy presents these as sins against patriarchy because they work against the gender norms that leave women powerless against sexual violence and the crimes perpetrated by patriarchy. When she discusses anger, she calls anger “beautiful” and “powerful.” Eltahawy asks us to

Imagine a girl justifiably enraged at her mistreatment. Imagine if we acknowledged her justifiable anger so that a girl understood she would be heard if anyone abused her and that her anger was just as important a trait as honesty. And imagine if we taught a girl that injustice anywhere and against anyone was also worthy of anger, so that she developed a keen sense of compassion and justice and understood that injustice, whether personal or affecting others, was wrong? What kind of a woman would such a girl grow up to be? (16)

This question still echoes through me as I raise my daughter. Eltahawy begins with anger as she chronicles and discusses her sexual assaults and how all of these “necessary sins” can combat the kinds of violence perpetrated on women’s bodies.

Eltahawy discusses anger as “a valuable weapon in defying, disobeying, and disrupting patriarchy, which pummels and kills the anger out of girls” (16). Thus, by embracing and employing our anger, we can use the tool that patriarchy has tried to take away from us. As Eltahawy discusses regarding her other “sins,” the very things that are taken from us or socialized out of us are the ways to disempower patriarchy. When she argues that we should use profanity, she uses herself as an example: “As a woman, as a woman of color, and as a Muslim woman, I am not supposed to say ‘fuck’” (56). She, nonetheless, begins her speaking engagements with the phrase “fuck the patriarchy” (56). She argues that “We must recognize that the ubiquitous ways patriarchy has socialized women to shrink themselves—physically and intellectually—extend also into language, into what we can and cannot say. It is not just a fight for

airtime. It is not just a policing of women's egos. It polices women's very language" (57). Eltahawy suggests that profanity and anger are both tools to work against patriarchy. This is why I chose to keep what some readers may consider profanity in this article. I believe that our language should not be suppressed and controlled, nor should our rage.

Pregnant Rage

I found out very early, using genetic testing, that my baby had no detectable genetic abnormalities, and I found out that my baby would be a girl. At first, I thought *Cool*, and then the realization quickly dawned on me that my child would have more rights to her bodily autonomy as an embryo and fetus, without a fully developed brain, even, than when she was an independent, breathing person outside my body. FUUUUUUUUCK!

What is a mommy, a very liberal, very feminist English professor, to do?

I decided from the moment I could first feel the little flutters that I needed to name her, and it had to be a name with a meaning of strength or warrior. This little lady was going to need to be a tenacious, fearless, strong little warrior to live in this world. I also decided she needed a name defying gender conventions, one she could use no matter where her gender fell on the great grid of gender possibilities (yes, grid, not binary line). Maybe a four-dimensional thing that we cannot even conceive of yet. Societal gender ideas are too limiting and promote dominance and unhealthy norms for everyone. So, I researched names. I settled on Louella, which means strong or beautiful warrior, and Louie as a nickname (coincidentally, the name of both my husband's maternal grandfather and mine). Spoiler: Louie is a healthy and happy little one now. She is great! But I worry just the same about how she thinks of her bodily autonomy and how others perceive her rights to her own body.

In her chapter on lust as a necessary sin, Eltahawy says, "I own my body. I own my body: not the state, not the street, and not the home. I own my body: not the temple, not the church, not the mosque, not any other house of worship" (157). This is a refrain I will have to teach my daughter, as men in the US, since Trump's second inauguration, have taken to chanting and carrying signs at protests proclaiming "your body, my choice" in response to women's insistence on being able to have bodily autonomy (Tolentino). To legislate away a woman's right to decide what to do with her own body is bad enough, but now these men also seem to feel emboldened to threaten ownership of women's bodies in violent ways, grossly expanding rape culture. All these rhetorical choices on the part of prolife groups harken to privileging a ball of cells or a fetus ahead of a fully grown person. And it vastly diminishes what pregnancy and birth do to a female body and the harm pregnancy and birth can inflict on particularly young or vulnerable female bodies.

Nurturing Rage

In addition to not having legal rights over my body at this time, I was also dealing with issues at work. My department chair wanted to deny me time for maternity leave before and after I gave birth. I was doing something enormously and intensively embodied by growing and birthing a human, so I turned to narratives to process my rage. The novels *When Women Were Dragons* by Kelly Barnhill and *The Power* by Naomi Alderman use narrative devices of artifacts: newspaper clippings in the former and archaeological objects in the latter. These narrative devices serve to offer a documentary feel to the stories. Both stories are about women feeling fed up and angry. In *The Power*, women take over the world and decimate the male population. In *When Women Were Dragons*, women turn into dragons and eat the men who have wronged them. Add to this the novel *Nightbitch* by Rachel Yoder, in which an artist-turned-stay-at-home mom with her baby boy begins to think she turns into a dog at night, and she proceeds to care for her son in animalistic ways, such as licking him clean and carrying him around in her mouth. As I fought to get maternity leave from my position and stayed home with my newborn daughter, these alternative stories made me not feel so alone in my struggles as the female parent of an infant. Considering the lack of available and affordable childcare in the US, we have reason to fuel our rage at the mistreatment of expectant and new mothers in more than just healthcare.

I do not think we could find a more effective way to kill women and to push women out of the workforce than this storm we are currently weathering in the US. If I get pregnant, I cannot make informed choices about my body in consultation with my doctors. Maternal mortality rates have increased. As of January 2025, the Gender Equity Policy Institute (GEPI) reports that “mothers living in states that banned abortion are nearly two times as likely to die during pregnancy, childbirth, or soon after giving birth” (GEPI, “Maternal”). In Texas, where courts have upheld some of the strictest abortion bans, maternal mortality rose 56% ... in the first full year of the state’s abortion ban; up 95% among White women.... Women’s risk of maternal death in Texas was 155% higher than in California” (GEPI, “The State”). And women who face intersectional forms of oppression have experienced a greater increase: “Black mothers living in banned states were 3.3x as likely to die as White mothers in those states.... Latina mothers in Texas faced nearly triple the risk of maternal mortality as those in California” (GEPI, “The State”).

In Missouri, where abortions and necessary maternal care are illegal, doctors have been leaving the state. All the doctors I had for infertility and my high-risk pregnancy have left their positions at the University of Missouri medical facilities, where I received care and delivered a healthy baby. I am afraid that women and mothers will soon face greater numbers of healthcare deserts, and

fewer doctors will be trained in proper maternal and reproductive care for women, which extends beyond prenatal, neonatal, and postnatal care. I am filled with rage when I look at these statistics for the people who have lost their lives or their loved ones due to a lack of healthcare options. While I am encouraged by the community fundraising that helps women get maternal care and abortions, and the number of people stockpiling Plan B, which has a shelf life of five years, I am so angry that women and their care are not prioritized. The irony of a so-called prolife movement that does not foster maternal, life-saving care, does not subsidize childcare, and effectively removes care and concern for living and breathing humans raises my ire more. The movement is not about life; it instead wishes to control female bodies, careers, lives, and health.

While I recognize that I benefit from certain privileges, that only makes me angrier. Other people have it worse. Different forms of oppression—such as racism, classism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, and bigotry—are becoming worse in the US. We have to think about intersectionality and the effects this has on nonwhite bodies, gender-nonconforming bodies, and intersex bodies (like we see glimmers of in *The Power*, when a male-appearing teen is outed for having a special power to control electric currents, which appears only in women). This only leads me to more rage, though. Injustice for so many cannot possibly be good for society. I believe in compassion and that love is a unifying force built into the commonality of the human condition. But I am also really fucking angry.

Mothering Rage

As I wrote this article, several things happened to erode the rights and welfare of women. In my state of Missouri, the House of Representatives passed a bill to overturn Amendment 3 of the Missouri Constitution, which was created as an initiative petition brought forward by Missouri voters and passed by 51.6 per cent in November 2024 (Kellogg). What is perhaps most insulting about the Republicans in our state overturning the will of the democracy and will of the voters, not for the first time, is the fact that they have characterized voters as ignorant. Anna Spoerre explains, “Missouri anti-abortion elected officials have since vowed to either restrict or repeal the reproductive rights amendment, known as Amendment 3, arguing that Missourians didn’t understand what they were voting on when they checked ‘yes’ at the ballot box.” This minimization of voices of opposition is too similar to the silencing effects of misogyny that Kate Manne discusses in *Down Girl*, where she connects strangulation, silence, and misogyny:

One can silence and be silenced in numerous different ways.... You can put words into her mouth. You can stuff her mouth and cheeks

full of deferential platitudes. You can threaten to make her eat certain words that she might say as a prophylactic against her testifying or so much as recognizing what is happening to her and others. You can stonewall, and make her utterance doomed to fail, less than hollow. (4–5)

Silencing part or even all of the voters has become *de rigueur* in the American political landscape, both locally and nationally, as elected representatives refuse to meet with the people they represent and refuse to acknowledge opposition to the rise of fascism in the US. But what is perhaps more absurd is how the presidential executive orders lately have moved from targeting trans and immigrant populations to targeting women as voters and citizens. On 23 April 2025, President Trump signed an executive order titled “Restoring Equality of Opportunity and Meritocracy,” which targets the Equal Credit Opportunity Act (ECOA). The ECOA was first passed in 1974 and amended in 1976 to prevent lenders from discriminating against women based on marital status (Clark). This is part of what granted women the right to take out credit cards in their name. This follows the Executive Order of 25 March 2025 titled “Preserving and Protecting the Integrity of American Elections,” which unduly affects married women who have changed their last name at marriage because they will need to acquire a passport to vote. Setting aside the fact that executive orders cannot constitutionally repeal laws in the US, the terror and attacks on many people in the US are relentless now, and while our federal courts have been blocking these acts, the rapid pace with which they continue to assault some of the most vulnerable people in the US is exhausting and unnerving. When politicians begin to legislate women’s bodies to remove bodily autonomy, their access to financial equality, and even access to due process in many cases, it is easy to understand why so many countries have issued travel advisories to not travel to the US. But as a mother and someone whose sex is listed as female on my documents, I am finding it next to impossible to be a woman and a mother to female children in the US. How can I raise my baby to have fewer rights now than she did when she was not a viable, fully formed human? And this does not even touch upon my motherly relationship with my stepson, whom I do not want to live in a system where he may have extreme male privilege and power over those who were assigned female at birth.

As I put the finishing touches on this article for submission, I am perplexed and outraged by the US. Just a few days ago, President Trump spoke about offering five thousand dollars to any mothers who gave birth to a baby and awarding a “national medal of motherhood” for mothers in the US (Speakman). Immediately, I thought of the Nazi Germany “mother’s cross” that was used to encourage the rise of the Aryan population while the Nazis murdered so many mothers and children. The idea of valuing some people over others is

particularly troublesome in our current climate. This small sum of money would not go far to even pay the medical bills for birthing a child, when the national average before health insurance is USD 18,865 and \$2,854 out of pocket with insurance (UW Health), not to mention all the other expenses of maternity and childrearing, especially the cost of daycare. And this does not consider all the people in the US who are living at the margins of poverty and all the people who do not have health insurance coverage. There is so much more to being a mother than simple finances: we need reliable, affordable healthcare for mothers and children; we need good daycares and public schools; we need stable jobs that provide a living wage; we need supportive communities; we need paid parental leave; and we need so much more. But our children, above all, deserve better, always, and that is what really incites my rage. Everyone deserves bodily autonomy and human rights, and when our government and legislature ignore these facts, well, then, fuck patriarchy and bring on the mom rage and the righteous rage that comes from caring for other humans. Let us breed our rage, develop it, nurture it, and mother it. Let us allow it to flourish and mature until we can channel it into lasting change for the good of all humans.

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Poetic Inquiry: International Doctoral Students' Roles as Digital Learners, Educators, and Mothers during Lockdown

The COVID-19 pandemic, a global crisis of unprecedented scale, caused widespread upheaval and significantly affected international doctoral student mothers (IDSMS) worldwide. Due to visa and travel restrictions, some IDSMS began their doctoral work in their home countries in different time zones with limited connectivity and resource access. Others in the United States used digital devices to coparent their children and support significant others. In this article, we describe how we used an interpretive approach, notably poetic inquiry, to delve into the experiences of six IDSMS from Egypt, Pakistan, Ukraine, Bangladesh, Palestine, and Botswana. Our found poems, a product of this unique methodology, provide educators with a nuanced and enlarged understanding of how technology eased and challenged IDSMS' roles as mothers, digital learners, and educators during an extended lockdown. Higher education institutions (HEI) committed to creating inclusive spaces can use the found poems to ignite interdisciplinary, cross-sectoral dialogue about how to meet the needs of this underrepresented and underserved population. This article will also aid qualitative researchers interested in exploring poetic approaches for data analysis and representation.

Introduction

The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic in the spring of 2020 after it spread worldwide. In a few days, academics and students accustomed to the traditional face-to-face teaching and learning model had to adapt to the new standard: remote teaching and learning via web-conferencing systems like Zoom. Travel restrictions during the pandemic thwarted international students' plans to begin their doctoral programs in the United States (US); they began coursework from their home countries via video

conferencing systems like Zoom at odd hours, with unstable internet connections. Although scholars have documented the experiences of international graduate students during the pandemic, they have yet to study the experiences of international doctoral-student mothers (IDSMs) under multiple COVID-19-induced lockdowns during the 2020–2021 academic year. In an increasingly polarized and inequitable society, we need research methods that foster genuine listening, build empathy, and humanize others. With this end in mind, we used poetic inquiry to gain insight into six IDSMs' use of technology as mothers, digital learners, and educators during the pandemic. Poetic inquiry enabled us to be "alert to words and the worlds of others" (Glesen 29).

In the first part of the article, we describe the scholarly literature that informed the design of this study. Next, we acknowledge our minoritized position in the US, which shaped how we collected and interpreted the data. In the methodology section, we describe our rationale for using poetic inquiry, an arts-based research methodology (ABR), to analyze data and communicate research results artistically as found poems. We hope these found poems amplify the voices of the six IDSMs and engage readers in authentic, interdisciplinary, and cross-sectoral dialogue about this underrepresented and underserved population. We also hope these poems ignite a conversation about how educators and community members can partner with IDSMs to create more inclusive universities in this postpandemic world and in times of crisis.

Literature Review

Several strands of scholarly literature informed the study design and mode of inquiry. In this section, we briefly synthesize research that describes the experiences of international graduate students (IGSs) and IDSMs during the pandemic. We also synthesize pre- and postpandemic literature that describes these IGSs' and IDSMs' use of technology to parent, learn, and teach online.

International Students during the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic presented new challenges for international students. Many scholars have used quantitative (Chirikov and Soria 6; Mok et al. 7; Van de Velde et al. 114) and qualitative approaches (Mokbul, 77; Phan 350; Phu 242) to describe these challenges. Ka Ho Mok et al. (7) note that the pandemic decreased and shifted the mobility flow of international students, while Igore Chirikov and Krista Soria show that undergraduate and graduate and professional international students in the US were critically concerned about maintaining good health during their studies, managing immigration and visa issues, and having financial support (2). Other scholars report that

pandemic evoked in international students a severe state of anxiety (Feng et al. 252) and heightened social and psychological distress (Al-Oraibi et al. 8). Fewer scholars, however, describe how international student mothers' (ISMs) marital status and role as parents (Bhatti et al. 440:6; Phan 350; Phu 242) affected their academic, social, and emotional/mental well-being during the pandemic.

IDSMS during the Pandemic

Forbes reports that doctorates awarded to students on temporary visas surged from 17.5 per cent in 1987 to 29.9 per cent in 2017. Evidence shows that many international doctoral students are mothers raising their children in the US. Others parent from a distance (Zhang 441). While there is an abundance of studies examining academic (Doyle et al. 4; Schriever 1962), mental and emotional wellness (Abetz 77; Box 1; Phan 349; Schwab 7), and social interaction (Phu 241) of mothers working on their doctorate, little research explores IDSMS' experiences either before (Phu 241) or during the pandemic (Phan 338).

Learning, Teaching, and Parenting during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The scholarly literature confirms that the pandemic further exacerbated the digital divide. PWC Prasad et al.' study, conducted before the pandemic, suggests that the learning experiences of students from Asia, Africa, or the Middle East may differ significantly from those in the US. Tala Michelle Karkar-Esperat, who used a mixed-method approach to study students enrolled in online, asynchronous classes in an American public university, notes that "students faced challenges with English language proficiency, isolation, instructors' lack of experience, and a lack of motivation to study in online classes" (1722). Evidence shows that international students' exposure to online and hybrid courses was more limited than some of their American counterparts (Han et al.167; Prasad et al. 92). Countries that previously regarded the internet as a complementary or supportive tool had to use it, and remote instruction, as the fundamental tool for delivering education when the pandemic began in March 2020 (Al Lily et al. 2; Aladsani 198). Yesul Han et al. reported that during the pandemic, "international students' learning may have been more affected than domestic students, potentially further aggravating educational inequalities" (166). Their phenomenological study of the online learning experiences of seven IGSs from six countries reveals that students' emotional challenges during the pandemic stemmed from being away from home and family. They experienced emotional turmoil because leaving the country was "too risky" (171). They found the need for in-person interactions with instructors and peers challenging and appreciated online

breakout sessions that allowed them to interact with other students.

Learning how to teach effectively online during the pandemic posed a significant challenge. Amit Mittal et al.'s survey of 222 university faculty members in the US found significant differences in faculty members' feelings before and after conducting classes through online teaching (20). Educators who had never taken an online course had to learn how to teach online and hybrid courses during the pandemic, navigate unfamiliar digital tools, adapt lesson plans for remote delivery, and maintain student engagement in an environment characterized by distance and isolation (Johnson et al. 6; Mittal et al. 20; Ramlo 244–46). Susan Ramlo analyzed thirty-six statements from faculty participants to describe their subjective viewpoints about the move from face-to-face (F2F) instruction to online instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Her participants reported frustration with their ability to best support their students in the online format. Nichole Johnson et al. surveyed 897 faculty and administrators at 672 U.S. institutions and found that most faculty changed their assignments or exams when transitioning to the new delivery mode (9). The primary areas where faculty and administrators found a need for aid were related to student support, greater access to online digital materials, and guidance for working from home. This study provides an early snapshot of efforts towards teaching and learning continuity at a large scale and offers some insights into future research and practice.

Before the pandemic, ISMs often used video conferencing for supplementary online or hybrid instruction. However, with the onset of the pandemic, technology took on an even greater significance. In addition to its instructional purposes, it became a vital tool for these mothers to connect with their home families, especially during the pandemic when their spouses and children lived in their home country. They used video conferencing systems, such as Zoom, FaceTime, and Facebook Messenger, on their computers and phones to support and sustain their family relationships (Zhang 441).

Several scholars have documented IGS and IDSMS' experiences with remote instruction and parenting before (Kibelloh and Bao 467) and during the pandemic (Murad 12; Wiederhold 437). Mboni Kibelloh and Yukun Bao examine international female students' perceptions and behavioural intentions towards e-learning as a tool for resolving overseas higher education and family strain (473). They used face-to-face interviews with twenty-one female international students enrolled in classroom-taught degree programs at a university in Wuhan, China. The findings reveal that e-learning makes it easier to balance study with family and is more feasible in terms of saving time, money, and energy. However, key concerns include poor and costly internet connectivity in developing countries, a perceived negative reputation, as well as a lack of face-to-face interaction and a lack of motivation in an online environment. In her conceptual paper, Brenda Wiederhold discusses

how technology, such as Zoom, made it possible to continue some semblance of business as usual during quarantine, allowing people to move their lives online while keeping physical distance to stop the spread of the virus. However, using technology never comes without a few bumps, as Wiederhold explains: “Aside from mechanical malfunctions and networks struggling to handle increased traffic, people are now beginning to recognize a new phenomenon: tiredness, anxiety, or worry resulting from overusing virtual videoconferencing platforms” (437). There appears to be a dearth of literature that describes how IDSMSs used digital devices to parent their children during the pandemic.

Guided by theoretical and methodological gaps in scholarly literature, this chapter is based on data from a larger qualitative study exploring IDSMSs’ academic, social, and emotional wellbeing during the pandemic. We focus explicitly on a cross-section of interview data that describes how six IDSMSs transitioned to online parenting, learning, and teaching during the pandemic.

Method and Modes of Inquiry

We used a qualitative approach to collect and analyze interview data collected between spring 2020 and spring 2021. This section describes our positionality, the study’s design, and the data collection and analytic procedures.

Collective Positionality Statement

It is common knowledge that the academy fosters feelings of isolation in some and fierce competition in others. Women of colour (WoC) often lack institutional support and service responsibilities encroach on work-life balance (Gutierrez y Muhs et al.). Crystal (author one) is a middle-aged Pakistani American who came to the US as an international student twenty years ago. She is a first-generation immigrant and a full professor at a research university in the US. Ragia (author two), who took a class with Crystal in the spring of 2020, is a youngish Egyptian married woman on an F1 visa. She is raising three children independently while working on her doctorate in the US. Our shared experience as international students and WoC fuelled our interest in designing this qualitative study exploring IDSMSs’ experiences during the pandemic.

Purpose and Research Question

We used poetic inquiry, a vibrant ABR methodology, because it privileges the voices of both participants and the researcher. We wanted to move the reader “affectively as well as intellectually” (Prendergast 546). This approach offered a novel set of data generation, analysis, communication, and engagement methods that amplified the voices of our participants: six IDSMSs. We used the interview data to craft found poems in response to the following research

questions: *How did technology facilitate or constrain IDSMs as (a) learners, (b) educators, and (c) mothers during the pandemic?*

Sampling Method

We used purposeful sampling procedures and the snowball approach (Creswell 262; Edmonson and Irby 80) to recruit participants who:

1. were citizens of a country other than the US;
2. were women enrolled in doctoral programs in the US for at least three or more consecutive semesters in spring 2020, fall 2020, and fall 2021;
3. held F1 visas; and
4. had children between the ages of 1-30 in the US or their home country.

We consciously tried to select interviewees of different races, ethnicities, and countries at various stages of their doctoral programs.

Instrumentation

We employed multiple steps to establish the face validity of the interview protocol (Allen et al. 159). We used Bridges's transition model for change and Goode's theory of role strain to guide the design of our research and interview questions. Next, Crystal, an international faculty member, created the interview protocol. We revised the protocol based on feedback from an IDSMM and two international faculty members who raised young children during the pandemic. The final version of the semistructured interview protocol included a warmup section and fourteen open-ended questions organized into three sections: Getting to Know You, Pandemic Experience, and Transition and Strain. We used this protocol first, followed by a follow-up interview a week or two later. We based the follow-up interview questions on gaps we identified through preliminary data analysis.

The Rationale for Using Poetic Inquiry

Even though poetry as a form of research has yet to be a central topic of educational research, we chose this approach for several reasons. First, poetic inquiry allowed us to group participants' voices to explore IDSMMs' lived experiences during the pandemic. Second, using "creativity and deep engagement" (Brown et al. 258) with the interview data allowed us to pay close attention to IDSMMs' language, deepened our reflexivity as researchers, and promoted the efficiency of qualitative expression. This article also adds to the limited ABR in doctoral education.

Data Collection and Preliminary Analysis

Crystal, previously an international doctoral student, interviewed Ragia, who is an IDSM and participant researcher. Following this, Ragia interviewed the other five interviewees twice via Zoom. She then edited the transcripts generated by Zoom. In phase one, Crystal watched the video recording of each participant's first interview and took notes on a re-storying table. Following this, she created a list of questions for each follow-up interview based on identified gaps. Ragia used the table and follow-up questions to guide the second semistructured interview with each IDSM.

Computer-Assisted Data Analysis

In phase two, we used NVivo, a qualitative research software, to code the data and engage in typological, interpretive, case, and cross-case analysis (Hatch 152–91). Next, we used structural coding, recommended by Johnny Saldaña (152) and matrix queries to categorize units of data into comparable segments. This approach enabled us to explore IDSMs' commonalities, differences, and interrelationships between and across their roles as digital learners, educators, and mothers. We regularly engaged in memoing, bracketing, and peer debriefing (Edmonson and Irby, 80) to enhance the trustworthiness of our data analysis.

Arts-Based Analysis and Poetry Writing

In phase three, we shifted from traditional analysis to poetic inquiry, an ABR approach, to further explore, understand, and represent the data and “bring into view some of the more nuanced elements of participants' experiences while maintaining an individual level of analysis” (Loads et al. 340). Our found poems, often referred to as “vox participare” (Prendergast 545), represent participants' lived experiences (Loads et al. 340) as learners, educators, and mothers during the pandemic. We share Sandra Faulkner's view that poetry “embodies experience to show truths that are not usually evident” (211), opening our research to new understandings. We began poetic inquiry by reflecting on the meaning and connection of data organized under different codes. We identified, extracted, and saved data related to the three categories—learner, educator, and mother—to a shared Google Doc. We independently used participants' words within the data to craft poems portraying meanings and connections. We paid close attention to the parts of the narratives that include conflicting or contradictory elements. We were inspired to write some poems focussing on single participants; others combined participants' voices with our own to facilitate an appreciation of the presence of both parties in the completed analysis (Glesne 203). In some poems, we used participants' voices unchanged. We took artistic license with others, modified word order and punctuation, and blended participant and researcher voices. We discussed our preliminary drafts during peer debriefing sessions. As connections became

apparent, we reordered words in each poem. Finally, we edited the poems, ensuring that they speak to the complexity of the data. To preserve authenticity, we intentionally left linguistic errors intact. We rearranged the words across multiple stanzas to powerfully express critical themes in the data.

Participants

Six IDSMS enrolled in two doctoral programs in the US took part in this study. All participant names are pseudonyms. Fatima, a forty-two-year-old Palestinian, Anastasia, a thirty-one-year Ukrainian, and Naledi, a thirty-four-year-old Botswanan, had stayed for their doctorate after completing their master's degrees in the US. While Fatima and Anastasia lived in the US with their spouses and children (five and two, respectively), Naledi's two children lived with her mother in Botswana. All three had teaching assistantships at the time of this study. Travel restrictions during the pandemic compelled Farah, a forty-seven-year-old Pakistani, Marium, a forty-one-year-old Egyptian, and Shapla, a thirty-seven-year-old Bangladeshi, to begin their doctoral coursework online via Zoom in their home countries. After completing her first semester of doctoral coursework in Qatar, Marium relocated to the US with her children, aged twelve, eight, and six. Farah and Shapla relocated to the US after completing two and three semesters, respectively. Farah's children were old enough (aged twenty-seven, twenty-five, and twenty-three, respectively) to be left behind in Pakistan. Shapla left her ten-year-old daughter with her spouse and mother in Bangladesh.

Found Poetry

Each IDSMS experienced the pandemic differently. We organized the poems in this section based on the three research subquestions. The poems in each section elevate our participants' voices to the fore and highlight interview data in an evocative and aesthetically rich manner. We encourage the reader to read each poem aloud to gain the full effect. At the end of each section, we present commentary on participants' struggles and triumphs.

How did technology facilitate or constrain IDSMs as learners during the pandemic?

Overwhelmed and Dis/connecteD

(Farah and Shapla)

Doctoral admission

Visa restrictions

New people with different accents

Will I survive the doctoral journey?

Low bandwidth

Different time zone

Six hour long synchronous sessions at night

Will I survive the doctoral journey?

Orientation program

Countless documents

But no VPN

Will I survive the doctoral journey?

A new way of learning

Digital textbooks and many applications

On a learning management system

Will I survive the doctoral journey?

Kaleidoscope

(Mariam, Shapla, and Farah)

Learners

From the east

And the west

Like bits of colored glass

We came together in a beautiful

Symmetrical geometric design

First, on WhatsApp,

Then, on Zoom,

Happy Hour!

Digitally connected in spring

Together, we created beautiful optical illusions.

We laughed

We talked

We dispelled our fears about tests and

statistics

We made memories

Happy Hours Behind the Screen

(Mariam)

When taking my first courses behind the laptop screen
Shielded, protected
Safe in the country that embraced me for eleven years
In my daughter's room, sitting at her desk,
I felt connected

Happy hours with my cohort, separated only by computer screens
Giggles resounding across the globe
Secrets shared with people we had never seen in person,
Secrets we never dared to say in class
Wine, coffee, and lavender tea
I felt connected

Distant and Fuzzy

(Naledi)

On Zoom, we connected with mates but were disconnected, too.
We were connected with instructors yet disconnected
Everyone seemed distant; everything seemed fuzzy.

The class dynamic has changed.
Were we connected?
Were we disconnected?

We attended Zoom classes.
We talked ... we laughed.
However, everyone seemed distant.
Everything seemed fuzzy.

Everyone in their own world
Their own bubble
So close,
Yet so far.

The Digital Cocoon

(Mariam)

Nervous and anxious at first....

...new culture

...new experiences

...new people

Safe and warm in my digital cocoon.

...Free to stay silent

...Free to speak

...It wasn't bad at all

Expert or Novice?

(Shapla)

I was a confident schoolteacher, an expert in my content area

... But an unsettled novice in doubt when taking my online classes

I was the expert who taught teachers how to manage online teaching during the pandemic

... But a novice student who feared Zoom classes and online learning

Where did the confident teacher go?

Has she gone forever? Will she ever return?

Death

(Fatima)

I am struggling

The loss of my brother in Gaza affected me severely

He was killed by a rocket

He left four young children behind

It is hard to come back to academic life

The trauma

I cannot describe it in words

I am

...paralyzed

...struggling

...cut

...distracted

When I try to focus on my dissertation

I get distracted and don't want to continue.

Mobile devices and video conferencing systems played a compelling role in the IDSs' lives during the pandemic. Marium, Farah, and Shapla constantly used their phones, laptops, and Zoom from their respective home countries, Qatar, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Initially, they needed technology to facilitate the application and visa procedures, which became even more difficult during the pandemic and a source of immense stress. When visa restrictions prevented them from travelling to the US, they used Zoom to join their classes. The American education system, in general, and online instruction, in particular, were brand-new experiences for Farah, Marium, and Shapla. Farah and Shapla described their angst when they started coursework in their respective countries ("Overwhelmed and Dis/connecting"). They did not experience what Vikram Ravi describes as a "first-level digital divide" (244) because they had access to the internet and mobile devices. However, they experienced a "second-level digital divide" (244); they needed more support in using what they had. They sometimes found the support and accommodations their professors and universities provided overwhelming.

Conversely, doctoral instruction via Zoom evoked many positive feelings in Marium. She enjoyed connecting with her peers via Zoom ("Happy Hours Behind Screens"). She welcomed having a safe space to think, reflect, engage, or be silent ("The Digital Cocoon"). Marium, Shapla, and Farah also enjoyed connecting with other doctoral students and professors via Zoom ("Kaleidoscope"). Naledi's perception of online instruction was different. She observed a disconnect as a doctoral student and teaching associate ("Distant and Fuzzy"). Two of the IDSs went through an existential crisis as learners. Shapla's transition from an experienced professional to a learner was challenging ("Expert or Novice?"). Fatima had a challenging time going back to her dissertation after the tragic and unexpected death of her brother ("Death").

How Did Technology Facilitate or Constrain IDSMs as Educators during the Pandemic?

Between Two Worlds

(Fatima)

Online teaching enriched my experience
 I could work while my kids were around
 Hearing their joy during classes
 Being a part of it, too
 In between two worlds
 A world of academia
 And a world of laughter
 I felt connected

Safe Online

(Anastasia)

The virus was killing newborns and older adults alike
 Rich and poor
 Man and woman
 Online teaching kept me and my baby safe
 It kept her away from the horrors of the outside world
 The horrors of the virus
 Killing people
 Without a hint of mercy
 It kept me near my bundle of joy
 I was comfortable
 I was protected
 Online teaching kept me and my baby safe

Administrator's Quest

(Farah)

COVID-19 wreaked havoc
Fourteen-hour days
Exhaustion
Isolation

Rules
Regulations

Struggling daily to meet
...The ministry's demands.
...Parents' demands.
...Teachers' requests.
...Students' needs.

Setting schedules.
Designing online instruction.
Monitoring social media.
Expanding our network.

Trailblazing

(Shapla)

New positions, new possibilities
Thrilled to be
 a teacher,
 an academic
 a coordinator,
 a doctoral student.

New positions, new possibilities
Enthusiastic about
 designing
 directing
 training teachers from morn till midnight

New positions, new possibilities
Afraid to
 Leave the familiar
 Leave my family!
 Embrace the unknown

Technology, in general, and online instruction, in particular, played an influential role in the lives of these IDSM educators. The experience was positive for Fatima, Anastasia, and Naledi, who gained familiarity with the US education system before the pandemic while doing their master's degrees. Their experience was limited to in-person instruction, so they needed familiarity with online instruction. For Fatima and Anastasia, in the US, the pandemic and online instruction proved to be a cloud with a silver lining. "Between Two Worlds" and "Safe Online" capture the immense gratitude they felt. Anastasia overcame fears about protecting her unborn child from COVID-19 when she was allowed to teach online ("Safe Online").

Farah, Shapla, and Marium kept their day jobs while working on their doctoral degrees from their respective home countries. While this ensured that they would have a steady source of income, it also challenged them in diverse ways. Farah's trials and tribulations illustrate how she was answerable to many supervisors to ensure that the K-12 schools she managed ran smoothly ("Administrators' Quest"). Even though the number of work hours in the day multiplied for Shapla, she revelled in the excitement of a new position and possibilities ("Trailblazer"). Both carried out these new and ever-increasing responsibilities alongside their doctoral coursework.

How Did Technology Facilitate or Constrain IDSMs as Mothers during the Pandemic?

Tethered to the Phone

(Farah)

They are all adults; they can take care of themselves.

I am finally free to focus on myself!

Yet...

I am tethered to the phone multiple times a day...

Comforting,

Supporting,

Advising.

Letting Go

(Naledi)

I haven't seen my kids since August 2019

Yes, I parent by video call.

What is the point in yelling at them when they are miles and miles away?

...I let them know I love them.

...I try to provide what they need.

...I protect myself from the virus because I must return to my kids.

I do not want to be seen for the last time

....in a box

The Quarantined Juggler

(Mariam)

Have you washed your hands?
Are you wearing your mask?
Put on your gloves!
That is not a challenging task!
A mother's job is never done!

Chromebooks not working?
What should I do?
Why is my son sleeping?
While his teacher's on Zoom.
A mother's job is never done!

When COVID-19 wraps its arms around me
I hide inside my room.
Working on countless assignments
With only books and my laptop to keep me company
A mother's job is never done!

Stay away from us, Mommy!
Why did you bring us here?
Take us back to Daddy...
I don't like it here.
A mother's job is never done.

Virtual Graduation

(Fatima)

I am a mother of five children who are always busy.
The pandemic brought them closer, and we were together.
I enjoy having them around.
Cooking,
Playing,
Relaxing, and more

However, I missed my eldest's graduation.
I couldn't see my son with a graduation cap and gown!
I missed the moment I had waited all my life for!
The virtual graduation was not the same.
This was a disappointing moment for us all.
The disappointment brought us closer.
We were in this together.

Once again, these IDSMs relied heavily on technology to execute their role as parents. Farah and Naledi, both single mothers, used digital devices to parent their children in Pakistan (“Tethered to My Phone”) and Botswana (“Letting Go”). While their phones and laptops were a source of joy when they connected with their children, they were also a reminder of opportunities lost. Both experienced immense guilt because they could not be with their children in person. Marium contracted COVID-19 a couple of weeks after arriving in the US. She had to parent her three children alone; her husband had to return to their place of employment in Qatar. “The Quarantined Juggler” highlights the emotional turmoil Marium experienced as a parent without a support network. “Virtual Graduation” gives voice to some of the simple pleasures Fatima experienced with her children during the pandemic. It also describes how her son’s virtual graduation ceremony sullied this joy.

Limitations of the Study

Even though this study lies at the emic end of the emic-etic continuum, readers should transfer these findings to similar contexts, with caution. We minimized some of the limitations inherent in qualitative research studies by using NVivo, a qualitative research software for typological, interpretive, case, and cross-case analysis (Hatch 152–91). During the poetry writing phase, we used structural coding, recommended by Saldaña (152) and matrix queries. We further enhanced trustworthiness by engaging in continual discussion and peer debriefing (Edmonson and Irby 80) during each phase of the data collection and analysis stages. Ragia’s dual role as participant and researcher increased the participants’ willingness to be vulnerable during the interviews. It also increased the authenticity of the poems.

Epilogue: Reflections and Recommendations

We interviewed each of the six IDSMs to gain insight into their academic, social, and emotional wellbeing during the pandemic. We examined a cross-section of the larger dataset to explore how they negotiated their roles as digital learners, educators, and mothers during the pandemic. While computer-assisted data analysis with NVivo helped us code the dataset, run a wide range of queries, quantify the data, and aided us in identifying the most significant volume of experiences, the context disappeared, and we lost some of the valuable elements of the narrative. We successfully recovered some of this when we engaged in poetic inquiry. This approach helped us identify shared values within and across interviews. In this section, we discuss the messiness of poetic inquiry, the creative and imaginative understandings of what it means to be an IDSM during the pandemic, and the themes and

intersections of systemic inequality in higher education. We also encourage future education researchers to consider adopting an ABR methodology.

Even though poetic transcription partially represents IDSMS' experience, it brought a different range of elements to the fore. In line with other arts-based approaches, making sense of mess and complexity allowed us to pay attention to complexity and gain insight. It helped us to recognize and make explicit some of the more conflicted or contradictory elements in participants' narratives and explicitly draw attention to their fragmented and interpretative nature. The found poems hold themes of change and transformation. The IDSMS who participated in this study cycled between what Gillies and Roger describe as the "holding-back and joyful/stretching-myself states." IDSMS felt isolated, alone, anxious, and helpless when they were in the hardship and holding-back state. In the "joyful/stretching-myself stage," they feel supported and inspired by like-minded peers. Interestingly, these states were not mutually exclusive.

Hardship and the Holding-Back State

The poems "Overwhelmed and Dis/connecting," "Expert or Novice," "The Quarantined Juggler," and "Disappointed" portray a cognitive-affective state characterized by the lack of agency, heightened fear and anxiety, depression, and the urge to disengage. These poems evoke the image of being stuck in a nightmare, powerless to escape. Encountering barriers and obstacles everywhere, IDSMS felt a desperate sense of inertia, which gave way to panic and powerlessness. Each IDSMS needed something different. Initially, Farah and Shapla had more difficulty transitioning to remote instruction than the others. They were limited not just by prior experience but also by limited connectivity and time zone fatigue.

Faculty can enhance IDSMS' learning experience and avert unpleasant outcomes in several ways. Doctoral programs can ascertain IDSMS' needs by conducting a needs assessment before coursework to gauge their digital maturity so that they can personalize the support they offer. Given that digital literacy is ever-changing, faculty must continue to familiarize themselves with IDSMS' digital issues while they are taking an online course in their home or host country. Depending on whether they are experiencing a first- or second-level digital divide, they may have to accommodate IDSMS differently. Farah and Shapla did not experience a first-level digital divide: the need for access to the internet or digital devices. They did experience a second-level divide: the need for additional training and technical support to harness the pedagogical benefits of the digital technologies they possess (Ravi 244). Consistent with the findings of other scholars, some of these IDSMS preferred verbal communication over written communication (Han et al. 165). They also needed more time to contact their instructors for help (Han et al. 165). Faculty

can use the principles of universal design to differentiate instruction by content, process, and product. IDSMs with young children, like Marium, need support systems that can help them adapt and thrive in their new environment. Program directors can address this need by connecting IDSMs like Marium with community members who can fill that need. They should also make childcare services more accessible so that IDSMs can take advantage of the library, counselling services, and the research lab. Travel restrictions prevented Anastasia and Fatima from travelling to care for family members in their home country after the loss of a loved one. Anh Ngoc Quynh Phan expressed similar sentiments in her autoethnography (70). Faculty can ease the stress of IDSMs who are dealing with grief due to the death of loved one or stress in general, by encouraging them to utilize the counselling center. They also need to make additional accommodations to help IDSM thrive.

Joyful and Stretching-Myself State

“Kaleidoscope,” “The Digital Cocoon,” “Between Two Worlds,” and “Safe Online” portray an intense sense of adventure, excitement, high agency, inspiration, and joy. The sentiments expressed in these poems originate from others and from within. The virtual and real-time interactions these IDSMs established via Zoom, FaceTime, and WhatsApp became crucial to maintaining a sense of belonging with their family and peers. The pendulum-like swing between these two states is not linear and is influenced by transitional, turning-point moments. These poems describe how personal characteristics, the institutional environment, and government policies limiting rights to security shape international student relationships. International students are a vulnerable population. They needed assistance during and after COVID-19. A commitment greater than simply attracting many students from different backgrounds is required. HEIs must show that they care for international students beyond their financial and academic contributions (Castiello-Gutiérrez and Li). Faculty and administrators must recognize that international students are not a homogeneous group; different international student groups require more attention during crises (Tonzini and Castiello-Gutiérrez 145).

The poems presented in this paper put the spotlight on IDSM vulnerabilities. This underserved population needed assistance during and after COVID-19. The impact of COVID-19 is likely to last long after the pandemic ends. Rakha Zabin recommends that HEIs should explore a post-COVID-19 vision (204). Ramlo’s study confirms that a one-size-fits-all approach to creating the best learning situations for students is not ideal; there are discipline and pedagogical issues to consider when moving in-person courses online that need to be fixed with technology. Ramlo advises administrators to understand the faculty’s instructional and mental health needs better, especially in an emergency such

as COVID-19 (257). HEIs should try to understand the social and financial support students have before and after they move to the US. To reduce feelings of stress and isolation, institutions should find a way to promote the social status of these students in the university community. Kelber Tozini and Santiago Castiello-Guiterrez recommend that HEIs “adapt academic policies in ways that favor flexible ways of learning” (145). Additionally, they could offer “flexible ways for students to enroll and earn credits even when not physically present on a US campus” (145).

Concluding Thoughts

The COVID-19 pandemic radically changed our lives. This article describes the experiences of six IDSMs enrolled in US doctoral programs and the multiple roles they played as learners, educators, and mothers during the pandemic. While the primary audience is IDSMs, who aspire to be professors, our participants’ experiences mirror those expressed by other IDSM (Phan 73), the ISMs and IGS who participated in other pandemic-related studies (Mokbul 80). Some of the poems may also resonate with American doctoral students. Our secondary audience is professors who prepare graduate and postgraduate students for the professoriate and higher education administrators. Recognizing that our secondary audience is academic, we avoided becoming a “third-world” broker by exoticizing participants’ experiences. We tried to communicate the complexity of our findings without succumbing to the temptation of reductionism. The found poems included in this article reflect our attempts to think poetically about the data and develop our poetic ear. We chose to use poetic inquiry because it disrupts hierarchies and humanizes research by centring participants’ lived experiences, evoking emotion, amplifying participants’ voices, and fostering researcher reflexivity, collaborative research, and public scholarship.

When considering a specific group or multiple groups of our intended audience, we paid particular attention to the voices that get silenced. The poems raise consciousness about IDSMs’ marginalized position in the academy. They illustrate how the six IDSMs’ access and use of technology, the number and location of their children, and employment status contributed to variability in the nature and intensity of stress, hope, and joy they experienced as learners, educators, and mothers. We hope the writing reflects our care and obligation towards the participants. We also hope professors and administrators use these poems to ignite a conversation about how educators and community members can partner with IDSMs to create more inclusive universities in this postpandemic world and in times of crisis.

Both authors found the poetic inquiry intimidating and challenging at first. As we got more comfortable with the process, we noticed patterns in the data

that we would have otherwise ignored. Crystal found new inspiration in her work as a professor and researcher by engaging in poetic inquiry, a new method. For Ragia, poetic inquiry offered a unique and valuable approach to self-reflection through metaphor, imagery, and symbolism. She gained new insights into her experiences as an IDSMM and saw them in a fresh light from different perspectives. This method also provided Ragia with more profound insights as she connected with other participants profoundly and meaningfully. This ability to shift perspectives fostered empathy, compassion, and a deeper understanding of herself and others. Ragia benefited from her role as the interviewer, as this position allowed her to recall not only the spoken words but also the subtle nuances of facial expressions and emotions of her interviewees. This added layer of sensory detail enriched her poetic compositions, providing a deeper, more textured exploration of the narratives she aimed to capture.

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SHEILA MARTEL

Six Poems

He Can Just Tell

A third grandchild exploded my world as easily
as the first and second. Not gold, silver, bronze—
each is a winner by birth. “He knows we’re
related,” I tell his mother as I hold him.

“He can just tell.” Knowing this boy has led
me back to a yellow college-ruled legal pad
and a Ticonderoga #2 pencil, where I draft
my first new writing in two years. I try to

describe how love for these grandchildren
is not the chocolate Valentine kind.
Rather, the soul thirsted and is quenched.
The soul heeds what the soul needs.

Grandbabies

The line goes on. New ones
here have seen to it, claiming
their turf as they will. I am
christened Mamie, by the first.
Already they are taking charge.
I have built my life brick by brick
by hand with chapters including bad wolves,
sticks, straw, and hot air being blown around,
sometimes by me. I appreciate being
alive in a time where the word
“grandmother” isn’t cloaked in
limitation or a prescription
to clean up the residue
of anyone who came before.
The tale I live is to say
yes to mystery
yes to curiosity
yes to unfolding.
Each grandchild who blesses my life
will be not prince or princess.
Rather, I strive to see each
in simplicity
in complexity
in all of their humanity.

Sparrows on a Wire

At the playground, my toddler
grandson enjoys the slide. His mother
calls my cell phone. "Hello?"
Breathing, no words yet.
She had a doctor's appointment today.
"Mom, there was no heartbeat." Sobs.

My brain, my heart, split in two.
I remain here at the slide,
sending him up and down.
I dare not feel one feeling
of my own. She and I agree
I will keep her son for a few days.

The toddler and I gather up
into the car, stopping
on the way home to purchase
overnight diapers, more milk.
As I place him in the child seat
of the shopping cart in the parking lot,

I catch sight of the incredible
autumn sky, many sparrows
on a wire. I am stopped, struck.
How can it be? How can beauty still
be when my precious one's pregnancy
is going, going and tomorrow

gone?

Mary Cassatt and Mom

Mary Cassatt, the American painter,
painted babies, picnics, and parlours
because those were available
to a woman of her time
place and space.

As a woman of her time
and place, my mother
was cocooned, groomed,
to become wife, mother,
no more, no less. She was

young, and my father was
in love with her. "Did you mind
leaving school because you were
pregnant with me?" My question.
"I hated school," her response.

When I think of my mother
as a person, as herself,
not mine even a sliver,
it seems that silver, even
bronze options, might have

caused that bright-eyed teenager
to sashay down a path filled
with boutiques, beautiful
fabrics, costumes and parties.
A chasm opens. This poet

might not be writing this poem
might not be writing this
might not be writing
might not
be.

Five Generations

Today, it's so accepted,

but back then—
as church-raised girls—
it was all about rushing.

Rushing
into the white dress,
rushing
into vows of eternity,
even if the unions ended
long before.

My maternal legacy:
my grandmother, my mother
and me
all tried on
motherhood early on:
a tried
true
treasured
family recipe.

We were BBA:
Baby-on-way
Before Altar.
There were no guns
held to anyone's head;
only lusting and
love making
that brought
forward
five living generations
of women
on advanced schedule.
That move took us
from a spot of shame,
like blood,
to a photograph worth
sharing, each of the five
smiling, looking like
what we are:
lions moving
with pride.

Emptied Out

i. Firstborn

She is leaving. Again.
At DIA, we trudge up the escalator,
across the walkway to the gate.
We find seats, then speak of the movie, *Titanic*.
It is all the rage I feel inside and more.
My heart beats faster.
“What row are you?”
“Ten.” She continues her story.
“I think they just called your row.”
Hushed whispers, a hug.
“Don’t cry, Mom.”
She turns and walks away.
This isn’t United as the signs
around us insist.
This is sinking,
drowning, fighting for air.

ii. Baby

The first night, the quiet
soothes by its simplicity, ease.
Outdoor sounds enter as ghosts
through walls of silence. Next night,
I sob in bed. “Goodnight, honey,”
I call out as tissues drop onto a pillow.
A week later, I arrive home
into the nothing. I miss her voice,
and all the noise she gave:
her cell phone ringtones, texts buzzing,
her laptop computer too late at night.
I miss her avoiding me.
Sometimes she didn’t look up
from her screen when I walked into her room,
arriving home from work.
“I need you to talk to me, just for a few minutes.
Make eye contact.”
“Okay.” She did.

“All the Good Roles”: A Narrative of Motherhood through Artifacts

To mother is to navigate competing impulses, to hold on and to let go, knowing all the while the impossibility of each urge. In this lyric essay, I explore the ambivalence of motherhood, the tension of a mother's desire to both preserve and destroy, through artifacts, both mine and my mother's. I take up my sons' baby teeth, their empty baby books, and the objects lost to my mother's dirt floor crawl space, the black mould, the bowing walls, all as a way of excavating both my and my mother's dreams of our creative lives before and during our lives as mothers. There is the caustic smell of Bic Wite-Out beside my mother's typewriter and, decades later, the three unworn wedding rings in my jewelry cabinet, all dormant objects that still buzz with longing. Ultimately, I do not seek in this essay to reconcile these competing impulses but to illuminate the complexity of a mother's desires for herself and her children, oftentimes at odds, and what we choose to keep and abandon in our stories as mothers.

In my house, misplacing something rarely bothers me because I know nothing is truly lost. For it to be lost, I would have had to throw it away, and I remember the things I throw away most of all.

Recently, I found an envelope of teeth in a leather purse in my garage. This is not a metaphor. The purse is mine, and the teeth belong to one of my four sons, although I am not sure which one, as tooth fairies often work at odd hours and under stressful circumstances, frequently rushing to work on the heels of fitful sleep. Slipping teeth out from under the pillows of slumbering children, without a floorboard creaking too loudly or a pillow lifted too noticeably, is no small feat. Then, there is the task of where to store these teeth in the dark morning hours before dawn. Over the years, I have found them in desk and nightstand drawers, sweater pockets, even under my pillow, and, in this recent instance, a forgotten purse in the garage.

The teeth, too, become forgotten, as it is not really about the teeth but about the magic of mornings that my sons wake to find their small bloody offerings missing, replaced by mystical gifts of candy and cash. The older the child, or the more harrowing the tooth loss, the more money they receive. During the chaos of my divorce, my youngest son, Willem, lost a tooth, which I promptly plopped into a pink ceramic teacup on the kitchen counter, a kind of temporary container, as we were heading out to run errands. Upon our return, it was not until I had started the dishwasher that I realized my mistake. In place of his tooth, Willem wrote a letter, a brutal, accusatory one, to the tooth fairy, explaining his mother's mistake. The next morning, he would find a generous stack of one-dollar bills under his pillow, his letter having moved the sympathetic fairy, his anger, now, assuaged. And although I don't know exactly where—in a drawer, box, or purse—is that angry little missive in his four-year-old hand's scribbled letters, I hold on to these things, every tooth and every letter, those small, still anchors in the current of motherhood.

It is not unusual for me to be searching for a stapler and to come across a plastic bag of blonde locks, one of my son's names scrawled across a scotch tape label, and the date I first cut their hair. My shelves brim with stacks of colourful construction papers and cracked and chipped paintings of small hands. I have always preferred to work on paper, so while my sons' report cards are all online, I save every physical copy, as well as every concert program, handmade Mother's Day card, notebook drawing, and schoolwork folder. A scan of my bookshelves will reveal the corners of handwritten letters I've placed in books that remind me of the letter-writers.

In my jewelry cabinet, in a small satin bag, I keep my wedding ring and my ex-husband's. He had left his behind the night he left and never returned, and while I had done everything possible to prompt him to leave, I could not bear to part with our rings, whose physical existence, their perfect circular weight, acts as a testament to our fifteen years together, few of them happy, all of them meaningful.

Next to my ex-husband's wedding ring and mine, I keep another diamond ring, an internally flawless one from Tiffany's on Michigan Avenue. Two weeks after my divorce was finalized, my current partner proposed with this ring, the proposal being a source of joy but also a source of embarrassment, knowing that such a quick engagement after the end of my marriage looked brash and foolish. Still, we moved in together. I wore the ring for a few years. But as time moved on, and the distance between my divorce and the present grew, the idea of being someone's wife became unappealing to me. Yet it is the ring I always wanted, one that sits, unworn, with the others.

I have been in a period of waiting, marking time until these objects are reanimated. In a hall closet, I have four beautiful but empty baby books in boxes, one for each of my sons, chosen for colours that remind me of each of

their personalities and temperaments. For years, every summer, I tell myself that I will gather up the children's artifacts and begin composing their stories. Every summer, as these objects and artifacts continue to accumulate, I do not put together the baby books, yet I do not throw anything away.

On the other side of a cheap, hollow slab door is the crawlspace. No garage or basement, the house has little storage space, but there. Growing up, when friends spent the night and asked what was beyond that door, I lied and told them it was my sister's room because I was ashamed that the six of us—my mother, stepfather, sister, two brothers, and I—shared only two bedrooms among us. Our house was cramped, chaotic, and cluttered, and part of me wanted to believe there was something else behind that slab door, or that, at the very least, someday we could make it into a livable space full of light. This, the 1980s, was also the decade of latchkey kids—kids who were without adult supervision, who, like those in *The Goonies* and *Stand By Me*, were off on adventures on their own, with possibilities behind every closed door and secret spaces humming with mystery and meaning accessible to children alone.

As a small child, although it was forbidden, I waited until my mother was preoccupied, which was often, to sneak my way in and creep, shoulders hunched and head bowed, through the wet, dark crawlspace. The sweaty pads of my feet stuck to the plastic sheet that covered the dirt and rock floor below. Somewhere in the blackness, I could hear the hum of the sump pump, although I could not see it, and I imagined it was deep and dangerous, like a well that I could fall into, like Baby Jessica had that very same year.

Back then, the crawlspace kept a porcelain baby doll with real human hair and a set of sterling silver children's flatware that the grandmother I never knew sent to me from Germany. I had only heard stories of these objects, imbuing them with mystery. The crawlspace, too, housed a doll cradle made of wood, painted red. It was mine, I knew, but for reasons I didn't know then, and I don't completely know now, I wasn't allowed to play with it. Same with the doll and the silverware. Boxes and boxes of love letters with German postage to my mother from the father I never knew. My mother's yearbooks. Stacks of old, worn paper playscripts from my mother's days on the stage. Old journals and diaries that were eventually and mercifully thrown out before they could be destroyed years later by the backed-up sump pump. In time, the crawlspace housed out-of-season children's clothes and garbage bags of stuffed animals from carnivals. My prom dresses. My little sister's prom dresses. My two little brothers' micromachines and Ninja Turtles. Report cards and piles of shit from when the cats crept in, then were accidentally shut in. Baby books covered in black mould. Boxes with rotted-out bottoms. Centipedes.

Year after year, until she never did again, my mother went hands and knees back into that dank space the length of our house to store boxes that would

either never emerge or emerge waterlogged and ruined. Under the guise of safekeeping, whether consciously or not, my mother left things there to be forgotten and destroyed. We were not allowed to retrieve anything once it was lost to the crawspace, and in this way, those abandoned things in that haunted place loomed large in my mind, beckoning me through the blackness to reclaim and restore them.

My mother, with the help of her father, bought her first and only home in the spring of 1985. It is a modest split-level, an example of late 1970s tract housing, cheaply and quickly made, and identical to its neighbours. As a child, I climbed the tall maple in the backyard to look out onto the stark horizon line, where our street, one of the first in the new suburb, ran parallel to miles and miles of cornfields. Back then, before the skyline was littered with McDonald's signs and the bright lights of Super Target, from our deck, we could watch the harvest moon rising above the golden corn husks on cool October nights. At the end of our backyard was a wooded area that, as a child, I called "the forest." It had a walking path a neighbour regularly mowed, and I would spend late afternoons burying treasure and secret messages under trees, and, as I got older, meeting boys in places where we could not be seen. "The forest" has since been cut down to make room for rows of townhouses, one of which has a large black-and-white FUCK BIDEN flag draped across the garage that I now pass on my way into town to take my sons to visit my mother.

Despite her thirty-seven years here, and counting, my mother never liked her home; she dreamed of farmhouses in the middle of nowhere, where she could keep chickens and bees, a home where she could be out in her garden without a neighbour approaching or a doorbell ringing. Even now, from late spring to late fall, she rises before dawn, unplugs her wall phone, and walks out into the dark, dewy mornings to plant, weed, and water before the rest of the neighbourhood stirs.

It was my grandfather who preferred the suburbs, new construction. After retiring from his work as a business owner, he began his second career as a realtor. A practical man, a man who joined the army to get the G.I. Bill to go to business school and get the hell off the farm for good, my grandfather had no love for old farmhouses or, for that matter, my mother's fanciful aspirations of becoming an actress. He paid her college tuition, so she went into education rather than theatre and earned her teaching license. "Something to fall back on," as my grandfather had urged my mother, became her sole means of provision throughout her decades-long teaching career. He gave her the down payment for her house, so she bought a split-level in the suburbs. But throughout my childhood, my family would take Sunday afternoon drives into the country if my mother saw a farmhouse for sale in the Sunday paper. She would slow down to a stop and point out the window for me to see it from the

backseat and talk animatedly about the kind of life we would have in the country. I would go to school the next morning and tell my friends that we were looking to buy a big farmhouse, although, like the story of my sister's room, which was really just the crawlspace, I knew it was a lie, even if my mother did not.

Decades after those drives, after raising four children and burying two dogs, four cats, two canaries, two hamsters, and one husband, my mother now lives alone and no longer dreams of farmhouses. After taking out second and third mortgages on the split-level she never wanted, she owes twice as much on the house as what it sold for in 1985, a significant source of worry for her in her recent retirement. The downstairs toilet does not flush, and her dishwasher has not worked for years, and it now exists as storage for handwashed cups and plates. The roof of the deck blew away several storms ago, and the steps up to it rotted and were replaced with stacks of concrete blocks. When her kitchen sink broke, she simply started washing dishes in the upstairs' bathroom's bathtub. Over the decades, the broken sump pump led to dozens of floods in the crawlspace, and the resulting black mould has exacerbated my mother's asthma and allergies.

Yet it would be a mistake to think of my mother as a victim of circumstance. It is not out of passive resignation that my mother lets things go.

Still, when I hear the abrasive clack of electric typewriter keys, I think of my mother. She was in her early thirties, a mother of three, when she returned to college to complete her master's of arts in teaching. I was in elementary school, the oldest of my siblings, and my two younger ones, fifteen months apart from one another, were out of diapers but not yet in school when she embarked on her thesis.

I would still be in bed when I heard the familiar buzz of the typewriter turning on, then the brutal first plunk of the type hammer against the carriage. Instantly, my stomach would churn. My mother wrote at the dining room table, near the kitchen, early mornings through afternoons, likely to be able to position herself in a space in the house where she could still keep an eye on my younger siblings, feed them when they were hungry, without having to move too far from her work. At dinner time, we would eat around stacks of paper, small but growing towers of her thesis chapters, and little bottles of Bic Wite-Out with their caustic yet intoxicating smell. Everything and everyone revolved around my mother finishing this piece of writing. As is the case with so many mothers and children, while my mother never spoke to me about her stresses or desires, both were palpable in her mood, comportment, and the nearly imperceptible sounds that escaped her lips when she felt that she was alone. But mothers, while oftentimes lonely, are rarely alone.

I remember my mother's long, delicate fingers carefully applying the viscous

white liquid to the page, blowing on it, smoothing it, her focus and fastidiousness making it clear to me that this action was paramount to completing another page. Wite-Out meant the day, like the page, could be redeemed.

But the graduate college back then had a limitation to how many errors could be obscured by Wite-Out, and at any place in the house, once that limit was exceeded, I could hear the violence with which my mother ripped out the page, crumpled it and groaned, and fed another sheet of paper into the typewriter, impatiently turning the roller knob and shoving the round paten back into place with the machine's too cheerful ding. Some days, she had to restart the same page a dozen times. Years later, the sound of the buzz of an electric typewriter still fills me with that familiar foreboding feeling of childhood, my mother's sobs just barely audible under the clacking of keys and the crumpling of tissue-thin paper.

But I also remember how prominently the framed photograph of her commencement ceremony was positioned on our living room piano, a kind of reassurance that those dark days had come to an end, and for many years, to my knowledge, they had. Other than memories of her grading her students' English papers, I do not recall my mother writing once she finished her thesis. The year I turned thirteen years old, she had her fourth child, an unexpected pregnancy, and her marriage began to unravel. She began teaching high school English out of financial necessity, first as a substitute teacher and then full-time until she retired in her sixties, not long ago.

Ten years after my mother finished her master's thesis, I became an English major at the same college where my mother had completed her graduate degree. I was in a semester-long seminar on the work of Oscar Wilde, a course I loved with a professor I respected and admired. One afternoon, as we were walking from class, I mentioned my mother had been a student at the college and likely spent some time in the English building. When I told him my mother's name, I saw on his face a flash of recognition that meant she had been his student, too. He said, "Ah, now that makes me feel old. But I can see it. You're both brilliant students and writers."

In my early thirties, much like my mother in her early thirties, I was finishing a graduate degree with three young children underfoot and an unexpected fourth one on the way. The month that I defended my doctoral dissertation, my sons were two, four, and six years old, and I was nine months pregnant with a baby who would come just after I made my final thesis deposit to the university and officially completed my PhD. My first son was born the year I defended my comprehensive exams, and the next two came during the ABD stage of my graduate work. Like my mother, I, too, have a framed photograph of myself at the commencement ceremony, my nine-months-pregnant belly utterly obscured by my black robe. But in my photograph, my three sons are there with me, as is my then-husband.

That was nearly ten years ago, and now I keep the photo in a desk drawer at my campus office. It is a painful reminder of so many difficult sacrifices during that time and the loneliness of motherhood, the loneliness of writing, too. On rare occasions, rummaging through desk drawers, looking for an old paper handout or file folder, when I see that photograph, I am struck by my ambivalence, remembering it as a moment of loss as much as a moment of triumph. Soon after that photo was taken, my fourth son was born, and my marriage began to end. I would not write again for many years.

In an act of amnesia, a kind of repression of my own childhood experience with a mother desperately and often hopelessly trying to finish a thesis with young children at home, I deliberately chose to have my first three children during the years devoted to writing my dissertation. I envisioned this situation as ideal, a kind of privilege, to be able to stay at home with my babies while writing and more or less living off student loans. I read and reread Louise Erdrich's beautiful *The Blue Jay's Dance: A Memoir of Early Motherhood*, relishing the lyrical descriptions of the intersections between the labours of mothering and writing, taking a particular interest in how those two realms of creativity and complexity might inform one another. In my mind, being ABD seemed a lot like the transition phase of labour, one that would be hard but short, the final push to completion before utter elation. In the months after I defended my dissertation, while nursing my fourth son, I wrote an essay on my own experiences of caretaking and writing (and trying to write) in graduate school. It was soon after published by a feminist press in an anthology, making it my first publication after finishing my degree, as well as my first publication that included a first-person narrative after so many years of stifled academic writing.

In here, there is a story of a particular momentum, a kind of success, which, at times, seemed to be a joyful integration between my lives as a mother and as a writer. But there is another story from the same time, equally true, one in which my marriage was failing and my resentments within the marriage were compounding, as I desperately wanted to write but was both the primary caretaker of our children and primary breadwinner supporting the family. Ultimately, I was never able to stay at home and write my dissertation, as it became evident in my first year working on it that, financially, we could not stay afloat if I did not seek out a full-time teaching job. So I did. That second year, when I should have been working on my dissertation, I put my writing on the back burner for the next three years to teach five writing classes per semester at the local community college, scheduling my teaching assignments around the babies' breastfeeding schedules. For those years, I did not write a word of my dissertation or read a word I had previously written. Four years into my ABD status, I received a letter from the graduate college notifying me that if I did not finish that year, I would be kicked out of the program. It was

my fourth pregnancy that operated as a kind of dissertation clock, keeping me focussed on finishing before the due dates, the dissertation defence in January and the baby's in February.

I often think about the kinds of sacrifices a creative life demands and how those demands are proportioned. My mother's dream was always to be on the stage, to live and breathe the theatre. It is what she studied during her undergraduate, but just as she was getting her creative life up off the ground, at nineteen years of age, she found out she was pregnant with me. A then-single mother, she moved back in with her parents, where my grandparents cared for both my mother and me. While raising me and then my siblings, she finished her undergraduate degree and then her graduate degree. She spent summers performing in travelling Shakespeare troupes and autumn and spring evenings performing in community theatre. Even so, with what seems like a kind of success, her degrees and motherhood and even chances to be on the stage, years later—my youngest sibling is now in his thirties—my mother still speaks longingly of a life she never had. While she spent nearly three decades teaching high school English and years directing high school plays, for much of that time she described her teaching career as one that was decided for her by her father, my grandfather, who paid for her education because, according to him, she “needed something to fall back on” if a life in the theater did not work out. And surely, as motherhood tethered her to Des Moines, Iowa, over the next several decades, my grandfather was right. Des Moines is not exactly bustling with opportunities in the arts. But in her sixties now, she continues to lament that she's too old for “all of the good roles” and even in retirement feels restless, often resentful of time and motherhood.

My sons are now nine, eleven, thirteen, and fifteen years old. I wonder what, if any, memories they will have of me writing, my door closed, what I can imagine might feel like an unspoken but pervasive demand to be quiet in the house when I am at my computer. I notice how my younger two sons approach me at my desk with some hesitation, unsure of my mood or my tolerance for interruption. I recognize the ways my children read me as I walk into a room, much like I did with my mother, trying to decipher where in my head I am at that moment, and how open I am to their stories of joy and desire, fear and confusion or if I am too wrapped up in my own stories of those things. I wonder how much of this has to do with being a mother or having a mother or something else altogether. And while I have never resented my children for any kind of effect they did or did not have on my writing life, I am still relatively young, still writing, and still hopeful for all the good roles.

Fields

“Fields” speaks of mothering a newly adult son. With imagery and sensory invitations, we—the words and I—convey the complexity of this changing relationship. Fresh grief tangles daily with wonder and hope. Waves of emotion manifest in empirical and speculative terrains with a desire to evoke curiosity, compassion, and reflection around a stage of mothering so often overlooked in the mother-child tumult of pregnancy, infancy, childhood, and adolescence.

Our time/s,
Seep singularly far,
Diffusing selves.

Our concentrations expanding,
Temperatures cooling,
Senses making sense differently.

Silos were always fields,
Undulating golden,
Scratching at the fences of “I am.”

Shifting syllables shape,
And sound maternal landscapes,
Of you and I back-now-forward in time.

I won’t see our harvest,
Face down in soil horizons,
Sighing elementary flows into earth.

ARIEL MOY

I so long to see you,
As our “us” loosens its threads,
And glides across my event horizon.

Our times ahead,
In silence,
Are beyond me.

Extracting Motherhood: Breast Pumps, Neoliberal Time, and the Mechanization of Maternal Labour

This article examines how breast pumps mediate maternal experience in the early postpartum period, functioning not merely as tools of nourishment but as sociotechnical artifacts that shape subjectivity, restructure time, and redistribute labour. Drawing from feminist technoscience literature, health and medicine rhetoric, and matricentric feminist theory, the study situates pumping within neoliberal regimes of productivity, surveillance, and efficiency while foregrounding the economic and gendered inequalities that structure access to its benefits. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the study analyzes in-depth interviews with four mothers in the United States who have used breast pumps across multiple birth experiences. Their narratives reveal the pump's dual role: enabling rest, milk donation, and shared caregiving while also imposing metric temporality, amplifying emotional fatigue, and extending maternal responsibility across new terrains. By integrating participant accounts with critical theory, the analysis shows that the pump often operates less as a tool of liberation than as a coping mechanism in the absence of structural supports. The article argues for a feminist ethics of maternal care that resists the privatization and mechanization of caregiving, and advocates for such policies as federally mandated paid leave, universal lactation accommodations, community-controlled milk-sharing systems, and public investment in caregiving infrastructure. In tracing how maternal labour is technologized, made mobile, and rendered measurable, this study contributes to feminist debates on care, embodiment, and the political economy of reproduction, reframing the pump as a site of adaptation and contestation.

Introduction: Breast Pumps, Maternal Promise, and the Logics of Technological Care

In the early hours of postpartum life, the breast pump often appears not just as a machine but as a promise—that milk will come, nourishment can be provided, and mothering can be performed even in the absence of latching or traditional support (Rasmussen and Geraghty 1356). For many mothers, especially first-time mothers, the use of a breast pump begins before they even leave the hospital, a practice increasingly common and often driven by concerns about milk supply or early latching difficulties (Loewenberg Weisband et al. 28). Especially in contexts where traditional systems of maternal support have been replaced by individualized, technologized care, the breast pump becomes one of the first tools through which maternal work is mechanized, tracked, and quantified, particularly when the presumed intuitiveness of breastfeeding is disrupted (Johnson et al. 128; Tomori 172).

This transformation, from relational breastfeeding to its technomedical and quantified rendering via the pump, is not benign. As Jessica Martucci notes, breast pumping is not merely an extension of breastfeeding but a distinctly technological act that can fragment the embodied and relational experience of feeding (791–92). The pump does not simply facilitate milk expression; it embeds maternal labour into systems of measurement and control that align closely with neoliberal logics of efficiency, output, and self-regulation (Geraghty et al. 135; Rasmussen and Geraghty 1356). This thinking echoes work by Valerie Fildes and Bernice Hausman, both of whom argue that breastfeeding, when technologized, is increasingly managed according to biopolitical and medicalized imperatives rather than maternal experience (Fildes 188; Hausman 146). By translating milk into a quantifiable product, tracked in ounces, stored in labelled bags, and scheduled for extraction, maternal care is rendered legible through metrics and mechanisms. The pump, in this sense, functions both as a prosthetic and a disciplinary device—a tool that extends care while reconfiguring it through capitalist and biomedical frameworks.

This article offers a feminist rereading of the breast pump as more than a lactation aid. Building on previous research, I argue that the breast pump serves as a sociotechnical mediator of maternal identity, both as a product and a producer of maternal subjectivity. In this sense, the breast pump becomes a site of maternal mediation: a point of contact where bodies, expectations, technologies, and ideologies intersect, shaping how motherhood is performed, measured, and understood. As a device that transforms the embodied act of breastfeeding into a process of extraction, storage, and optimization, the pump is liberatory and disciplinary: a paradoxical figure in the constellation of maternal care technologies (Faircloth 133; Tomori 175).

I situate the breast pump within broader frameworks of matricentric feminism, sociotechnical systems, and neoliberal governance. In doing so, I explore how maternal care is increasingly refracted through ideologies of self-regulation, productivity, and efficiency, where even the most intimate acts of nourishment are made legible through data, schedules, and mechanized output (Lupton 95; Orgad 29). Yet I also attend to the subtle acts of resistance that emerge: mothers who unplug, milk share, or reorient the machine's meaning towards collective and relational care (Baraitser 56; Subramani et al. 58).

By interrogating the pump's cultural, political, and material functions, this article contributes to feminist scholarship on care work, reproductive technologies, and maternal subjectivity. It invites a reimagining of maternal labour not as an individualized performance of adequacy but as a site of negotiation—where machines, bodies, and ideologies converge in tension and possibility, constraint and care, extraction and autonomy.

Neoliberal Motherhood and the Reconfiguration of Maternal Labour

To understand the significance of the breast pump as a sociotechnical mediator, we must first examine how maternal labour is structured, valued, and governed within neoliberal societies. Maternal labour, which is emotional, physical, and cognitive carework, is often rendered invisible or undervalued in public discourse. It is sustained through idealized notions of motherhood and hidden forms of domestic labour that are rarely acknowledged or compensated (Ciciolla and Luthar 470; Faircloth 104; Subramani et al. 58). Yet this labour remains essential to social reproduction, sustaining individual well-being and the economic systems that rely on it (Dowling 240; O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism* 13).

Under neoliberalism, the ideal citizen is imagined as self-reliant, efficient, and endlessly optimizing. These values are mapped onto motherhood, producing what Sharon Hays calls the ideology of “intensive mothering,” a model that demands constant emotional, physical, and economic investment in children, which the mother manages with little to no structural support (Hays 4). Numerous scholars, including Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad, have noted how neoliberalism frames mothers as entrepreneurs of the self: responsible for optimizing their families while managing their own productivity, resilience, and emotional regulation (Gill and Orgad 16; Rottenberg 421). Mothers are positioned as both managers of family life and objects of self-surveillance. They are expected to plan with precision, monitor milestones, and perform caregiving not just as a moral obligation but as a mode of identity, one that is unpaid yet highly professionalized.

This neoliberal imaginarity reframes carework through the language of

choice, entrepreneurship, and personal responsibility. As many feminist scholars have observed, neoliberalism presents motherhood as a personal project to be optimized rather than a social role supported by collective structures (Baraitser 69; Fraser, “After” 608; Orgad 45). In this view, the maternal body is no longer simply nurturing; it is regulatory, tasked with managing its biological outputs through logics of productivity, predictability, and risk management (Lupton 123).

This is where matricentric feminism becomes a critical analytic tool. Unlike broader feminist frameworks that sometimes bracket motherhood as a private or natural domain, matricentric feminism centres the material, emotional, and political realities of mothers. It asks us to take seriously the unique demands of mothering in a society that expects women to give endlessly while receiving little in return. As Andrea O’Reilly insists, motherwork must be understood not only as care but as cultural and economic labour shaped by policy, public discourse, and ideology (O’Reilly 15). In the neoliberal context, this labour is increasingly privatized, outsourced, or technologically mediated, even as mothers are held accountable for its outcomes (Pugh 39).

Technologies like the breast pump become essential tools within this system. They allow mothers to extract and deliver care while participating in labour markets, educational programs, or attending to other children or responsibilities. On the surface, the pump offers flexibility and agency. But as Bernice Hausman and others point out, this flexibility often masks deeper structural burdens, such as the pressure to track ounces, sanitize equipment, and align the body’s rhythms with institutional schedules (Hausman 153; Johnson et al. 127; Tomori 173). The pump becomes a conduit for aligning motherhood with market values, emphasizing standardization, efficiency, and measurable output at the expense of embodied and relational dimensions of care.

In this sense, maternal labour under neoliberalism is not simply about doing more with less. It is about aligning motherhood with the values of late capitalism: efficiency, surveillance, self-discipline, and optimization. The breast pump facilitates this alignment by translating care into quantifiable, mobile, and storable units—bottles of milk that can be logged, labelled, and integrated into daily schedules (Blum 87; Fildes 190). This transformation risks eroding the affective and embodied meaning of breastfeeding, reducing it to mechanical productivity.

As Elizabeth Podnieks and Amber Kinser remind us, maternal labour is shaped not only by choice but also by social forces that demand adaptability while denying support (Kinser 23; Podnieks xiii). The neoliberal mother is told she can “have it all” but only if she can manage it all, often through relentless self-discipline and the aid of market-ready tools. In this environment, technologies like the breast pump do not simply liberate; they impose new regimes of care that demand constant calibration between intimacy and

output, presence and productivity.

The disciplinary role of the breast pump becomes especially apparent in workplace contexts structured around masculine norms of uninterrupted labour. Even when formal policies provide lactation breaks or designated spaces, studies show that many mothers face covert pressures to limit use, conceal needs, or maintain productivity at the cost of personal wellbeing (Bai and Wunderlich; Tsai). Natasha K. Sriraman found that mothers who were emotionally and medically committed to breastfeeding often weaned early due to institutional inhospitality; they expressed milk in janitorial closets, storage rooms, or while multitasking, which fragmented the intimacy of feeding. This reality aligns with Martucci's argument that pumping can alienate the maternal by severing embodied rhythms from relational care. Yet these environments also give rise to subtle maternal resistances: mothers who reclaim pumping spaces, advocate for policy reform, or cultivate peer support. These acts underscore the breast pump's dual role—a disciplinary mechanism enforcing capitalist rhythms and a contested site where maternal agency and solidarity can emerge.

Beyond the physical architecture of institutional labour, maternal care is increasingly governed by digital infrastructures. Recent technological innovations in breast pumping—including hands-free pumps, mobile tracking apps, and Bluetooth-enabled monitoring systems—further illustrate how maternal care is increasingly governed by digital surveillance and optimization logics. Sawalha and Karnowski found that many new parents used digital tools to track milk output, feeding times, and infant intake, believing these would reduce anxiety. However, mothers frequently reported that such tools heightened their sense of failure or inadequacy when output declined or fell short of app-based benchmarks. Junqing Wang et al. explore how baby wearable technologies, though physically attached to the infant, profoundly reshape maternal caregiving by introducing logics of self-surveillance, optimization, and ambient monitoring. In this framework, the quantified mother figure emerges—a maternal figure whose care is mediated through data points, algorithmic feedback, and performance metrics. Therefore, this technological framing transforms the pump from a support device into an extension of capitalist self-monitoring, where even lactation must be logged, graphed, and improved. In this system, the pump becomes a prosthetic not only for the breast but for neoliberal expectations of constant self-regulation and bodily management.

As this section has shown, the breast pump cannot be separated from the broader ideological and material contexts that define maternal labour today. Recent empirical studies on lactation at work and digital pumping technologies underscore how maternal care is increasingly governed by surveillance, institutional time, and optimization logics. By integrating these accounts with

feminist theory, this article situates pumping within the expanding field of maternal technology studies while extending it through a phenomenological and relational lens. Rather than treating the pump as a discrete object or neutral aid, I frame it as a site through which maternal labour is fragmented, made visible, and subjected to new regimes of management.

Yet within these constraints, mothers negotiate meaning, resist logics of efficiency, and reclaim care on their terms. These dynamics underscore the need for an interpretive framework that can attend to both the structural forces shaping maternal labour and the lived, embodied experiences of those navigating it. This approach makes visible how maternal subjectivity is not only shaped by but also pushes back against the technomedical and capitalist frameworks through which it is often read. In doing so, the analysis contributes to feminist conversations about the politics of care by foregrounding maternal experience as a target and source of resistance in technocultural landscapes. The next section outlines the theoretical and methodological commitments guiding this inquiry into how the breast pump mediates maternal subjectivity.

Situating the Inquiry: Feminist Theory, Technoscience, and Interpretive Method

This study is situated at the intersection of feminist technoscience studies, health and medicine rhetoric and maternal theory. Each field contributes essential interpretive tools. Feminist science and technology studies foreground the non-neutrality of technology (Wajcman 6); rhetorical health studies interrogate how medical discourses shape embodied subjectivities (Jack 219), and maternal theory, particularly matricentric feminism, insists on centring the complex, often marginalized voices of mothers (O'Reilly 6). These frameworks expose how maternal experiences with breast pumps are not merely personal but are shaped by broader sociopolitical forces, including gendered expectations, biomedical norms, and technological mediation (Lupton 102; Oudshoorn 33).

Building on these foundations, this inquiry adopts a critical feminist interpretive methodology to examine the sociotechnical dynamics of the breast pump in shaping maternal labour and identity. The premise that breast pumps can simultaneously discipline and empower necessitates a methodological approach attuned to lived experience, situated meaning-making, and structural critique. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) offers a useful lens in this context. Grounded in phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions, IPA enables close, iterative engagement with personal narratives while attending to the sociocultural structures through which those narratives are formed and understood (Smith and Nizza 22).

The empirical material grounding the analysis in the subsequent sections

was generated through a series of semistructured, in-depth interviews with four mothers living in the United States (US) who had used breast pumps within the past two years. Each participant was a parent of multiple children and had used breast pumps across multiple birth experiences. Data collection occurred in two phases. The first interviews lasted approximately sixty minutes, followed by second interviews ranging from forty to sixty minutes. Guided by IPA's methodological tenets, each participant's dataset was initially treated as a single case to allow for microlevel analysis focussing on the idiosyncratic meanings embedded in their narratives. Macrolevel analysis followed, where patterns and points of convergence were identified across cases to surface broader thematic commonalities. The analytic process involved line-by-line coding, memoing, and conceptual mapping to trace the interplay between personal experience and discursive structures (Eatough and Smith 182; Smith and Nizza 55).

Poststructuralist feminist theory further strengthens this methodological stance by conceptualizing identity as fluid, performative, and discursively produced (Butler 25; Jeremiah 21). From this perspective, mothering is not a static role but an embodied and contingent process that is continually shaped by sociotechnical and institutional forces. Technologies like the breast pump do not simply support or interrupt this performance; they actively participate in its construction. As the preceding section illustrates, the pump reorganizes maternal time, restructures care routines, and generates new anxieties and expectations that are deeply intertwined with neoliberal maternal ideologies (Gill and Orgad 290; Rottenberg 425).

Taken together, these theoretical and methodological commitments prepare the ground for the analysis that follows. The breast pump plays an active role in mediating maternal performances and identities, structuring time and behaviour in ways that reflect broader biopolitical logics. Understanding this dynamic requires not only a feminist critique of medicalization but also sustained attention to how mothers live with and through the machines that mediate their care practices.

Data Collection and Analysis

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Institutional Review Board at Michigan Technological University in 2021. I recruited four participants using purposive and opportunistic sampling to ensure experiential richness and demographic variation. Inclusion criteria required that participants had used a breast pump daily for at least four to six weeks postpartum. Research shows that most mothers in the US return to work around six weeks after birth (Falletta et al.), which marks a pivotal point where breast pumping often transitions from being a supplemental practice to a central, sometimes primary,

means of feeding. Furthermore, studies in maternal health and lactation underscore that this early postpartum window is marked by increased physiological pressure to maintain supply, emotional adjustment, and logistical adaptations to return-to-work demands (Geraghty et al.; Loewenberg Weisband et al.). Hence, by focussing on this period, I sought to capture how pumping operates not simply as a bodily technique but as a mechanism of labour negotiation in the context of institutional abandonment.

The final sample included four full-time working mothers residing in the US, each parenting two or more children. One was Puerto Rican, one Black American, one white, and one African doctoral student who had lived in the US for seven years. I met the first participant serendipitously at a shopping mall while she was purchasing breast pump parts; others were recruited through social media and professional referrals. I conducted all interviews virtually using Zoom, a modality that not only allowed geographic flexibility but respected participants' preferences and aligned with literature validating the efficacy of virtual qualitative research (Archibald et al.; Deakin and Wakefield).

Each participant engaged in two semi-structured interviews. This dual-interview approach reflects my commitment to iterative meaning-making and is consistent with best practices in IPA, which emphasize layered exploration of lived experience over time (Pietkiewicz and Smith; Smith et al.). The first interviews (sixty to seventy-five minutes) allowed participants to construct foundational narratives about breast pumping, subjectivity, and care. I then transcribed and reviewed each interview before scheduling a second session (forty to sixty minutes), which allowed me to prepare tailored follow-up questions. This process not only honoured the depth of individual experience but also enabled me to return to themes that emerged organically in participants' own words—a practice recommended by Michael Larkin and colleagues to deepen interpretive engagement. This decision emerged from my feminist commitment to reciprocity and co-construction. By providing these reflections, I invited participants into the analytic process, offering space to clarify, expand, or resist my interpretations. This dialogic approach, grounded in the work of Lucy Yardley and Svend Brinkmann and Steinar Kvale, transformed the interview into more than a data-gathering technique. It became a relational exchange, where the mothers involved in this study were treated not as subjects but as epistemic partners whose insights refined and validated the evolving analysis.

For the analysis itself, I followed a multiphase IPA process. I began with close, immersive readings of each transcript, making analytic notes across three dimensions: descriptive (what was said), linguistic (how it was said, focussing on tone and metaphor), and conceptual (interpretive significance). I then organized emergent codes into broader thematic clusters and refined

them iteratively. I relied heavily on memo-writing, visual concept mapping, and a reflective journal to track my assumptions, hesitations, and interpretive shifts, a process that Jonathan A. Smith and Nicola D. Nizza emphasize as central to IPA's rigour. So, rather than bracketing my positionality, I treated reflexivity as an asset: My dual standpoint as researcher and mother shaped the ways I listened, questioned, and interpreted. In this sense, the analysis was not just procedural but relational and situated; it was an encounter between narrative, theory, and embodied insight.

Beyond Saturation: Idiographic Depth and Transferability in IPA

While the study involved a small sample, this is consistent with IPA's idiographic emphasis on analytic depth over generalizability. The aim was not to achieve thematic saturation in the conventional sense but to develop richly textured, contextually embedded accounts of participants' lived experiences. Each case was treated as a discrete interpretive unit before engaging in cross-case analysis, a foundational tenet of IPA enabling deep phenomenological insight (Larkin and Thompson; Smith and Osborn). Across these cases, strong patterns emerged concerning temporal regulation, maternal self-surveillance, and care redistribution. These recurrent themes were not treated as statistical trends but as interpretive resonances, shaped by individual histories and sociotechnical contexts.

Although the findings are not generalizable in a quantitative sense, they offer transferable insights into how maternal identity and labour are negotiated through breast pump use in structurally constrained settings. As IPA scholars argue, the value of such work lies in its capacity to illuminate how particular phenomena are experienced, not how frequently they occur (Smith et al.). By engaging deeply with a few carefully selected voices, this study contributes to broader feminist discussions of maternal technology, care ethics, and reproductive labour.

At the same time, it is important to situate these insights within the specific cultural and policy landscape of the US. The US presents a uniquely undersupported environment for postpartum care, with no federal paid leave, minimal workplace lactation protections, and deep structural inequities in maternal health. Furthermore, the Affordable Care Act (ACA)'s mandate to distribute breast pumps through private insurance has further increased pump usage, reinforcing expectations that mothers will manage infant feeding independently of structural support. These intersecting conditions may shape the sociotechnical mediation of pumping differently than in contexts with stronger welfare systems or alternative lactation infrastructures, although such comparisons would require further empirical inquiry. As such, the findings offer culturally embedded insights rather than universally generalizable ones.

Mechanizing Maternal Care: Surveillance, Time, and the Technological Reconfiguration of the Body

This section presents one strand of the interpretative findings, focussing specifically on how breast pumps structure maternal care through logics of surveillance, standardization, and temporal control. Drawing on participant narratives, this section critically illuminates how pumping technology enacts both constraint and adaptation, aligning maternal bodies with institutional expectations while enabling new forms of care and endurance.

One of the most persistent themes in participants' accounts was the regulation of time. Mothers described their daily routines as governed by pumping intervals, clock-based reminders, and supply-tracking systems that demanded strict adherence. As one participant put it, "You have to pump every two or three hours, no matter what. If you miss it, you mess with your supply" (participant one). Another shared, "It was kind of like a three-to-four hours thing.... I was doing it early in the morning, afternoon, in between feedings... whenever I had time to come home" (participant two). These accounts reflect how maternal care becomes embedded within an industrial temporality where nourishment is governed by efficiency and risk minimization rather than attunement to the infant or to the maternal body.

These individualized time regimes, while presented as neutral routines, reflect deeper institutional logics that prioritize regulation over relationality. This rationalization of time echoes Lisa Baraitser's concept of "maternal time" (67) as fundamentally interruptible and nonlinear, yet here it is overwritten by institutional demands and technological logics. Pumping schedules displace embodied cues and replace them with mechanized rhythms that prioritize production over presence. As Cecilia Tomori argues, such shifts represent a broader biomedical governance of the maternal body, where milk becomes a substance to be managed, extracted, and optimized (174).

For mothers working in low-wage, inflexible jobs, however, this temporal discipline can be nearly impossible to sustain. Women of colour and low-income mothers are disproportionately concentrated in labour sectors characterized by low job control, rigid schedules, and minimal workplace accommodations—conditions that make regular pumping breaks a logistical challenge and significantly curtail breastfeeding duration. Recent research identifies low job autonomy as a key predictor of early breastfeeding cessation and a partial mediator of racial disparities in breastfeeding outcomes, underscoring how occupational structures reinforce maternal inequities (Whitley et al.). The expectation to conform to mechanized pumping schedules thus operates unevenly across race and class lines, intensifying the precarity of lactation for already marginalized mothers.

The spatial reconfiguration of care was another striking theme. Participants

described pumping in cars, offices, and public restrooms, often in hurried, improvised conditions. One participant noted, “I was pumping early in the morning before I go to work ... and then again at work,” describing a routine that demanded performing intimate care in spaces not originally designed for it (participant two). Another added, “Wherever I could plug it in and lock a door,” referring to break rooms and single-stall bathrooms (participant one). These spatial negotiations reveal how breast pumping, though mobile, is frequently accommodated rather than supported, requiring mothers to make carework fit within the contours of institutions that were never meant to hold it.

The ability to locate private, sanitary pumping spaces is also unevenly distributed. For many hourly workers, disproportionately Black and Latina women, access to lactation rooms is not just inconvenient but often nonexistent. These workers are frequently relegated to unsanitary or unsafe environments, such as supply closets, cars, or public bathrooms, intensifying the emotional and physical toll of managing milk expression without proper infrastructure. As Su-Ying Tsai demonstrates, access to dedicated lactation spaces significantly predicts whether mothers will continue breastfeeding upon returning to work. In her study of labour-intensive workplaces, Tsai found that access to lactation rooms, formal break policies, and employer encouragement were all strong predictors of breastfeeding duration, with odds ratios as high as 61.6 for using breast pumping breaks.

These access disparities are not merely logistical challenges; they also illuminate the deeper sociotechnical norms that structure maternal labour. Such spatial dislocation reflects what Judy Wajcman calls the “gendered temporalities of technoculture” (14), in which technologies designed for flexibility often reinforce capitalist imperatives for constant availability. The maternal body becomes mobile yet fragmented and expected to deliver care while remaining unobtrusive in professional or public settings. This spatial compression intensifies the privatization of maternal labour, effectively making mothers solely responsible for fitting their bodies and needs into rigid institutional architectures. As recent policy expansions, such as the PUMP Act, attempt to close access gaps by mandating break time and lactation space across employment sectors, persistent inequities in enforcement and workplace culture remain obstacles to universal accommodation.

The datafication and surveillance of maternal performance emerged as another mode through which the pump restructured maternal labour. One participant shared, “Each [bag] has a label of the dates and the time that it was pumped and stored ... so that it doesn’t go bad” (participant three). What might seem like a harmless act of organization is, in fact, a form of care labour shaped by documentation and accountability. The mother becomes a technician of her own body, translating its outputs into traceable metrics. As Deborah

Lupton observes in her work on digital health, technologies often encourage self-monitoring that naturalizes discipline through routines of optimization and surveillance (114).

Moreover, while such meticulous tracking may feel empowering for some, for others, particularly those navigating racialized medical and welfare systems with long histories of scrutiny, it can reinscribe anxiety and hyperaccountability. Black mothers, in particular, are disproportionately subject to institutional oversight that frames deviations from normative standards of care as risk, amplifying the stakes of perceived maternal failures (Pendleton and Dettlaff). For the mothers in this study, the breast pump functioned not only as a practical tool but also as a system of monitoring that rendered their labour legible through logs, ounces, and timestamps.

Yet participants also described moments of agency, resilience, and adaptive care enabled by the pump. One mother explained, “Sometimes I needed a break, or one of the twins wouldn’t take formula ... so I needed to pump just to make sure he was fed” (participant one). In this case, the pump offered not only control but flexibility, allowing her to respond to the demands of multiple children without forgoing nourishment or emotional care. Another mother remarked, “I don’t know what I would have done without the pump. But at the same time, it felt like I was always tied to it ... like I couldn’t go anywhere without thinking about when I’d have to pump next” (participant two). Her words capture the ambivalence of maternal technology—how it liberates and tethers in equal measure.

This emotional burden was a recurring theme. One participant reflected, “It started taking a toll on my mental health ... what started as a privilege began to feel like pressure” (participant four). While pumping may offer functional autonomy, it also intensifies maternal self-surveillance and heightens the expectations for continuous productivity. For some mothers, this burden is compounded by economic insecurity. Mothers without access to paid leave or with precarious employment often face the dual pressure of maintaining milk supply and income. The Affordable Care Act provides breast pump coverage, but it does not guarantee the workplace conditions necessary to use it effectively. Policy solutions must therefore address both provision and structural support. Linda Blum and Bernice Hausman have long cautioned against viewing breastfeeding technologies as unqualified progress, pointing out how they can inadvertently erase the relational and affective dimensions of care (Blum 92; Hausman 148). These narratives confirm that maternal technologies often reproduce the strains they promise to relieve.

Ultimately, these findings suggest that the breast pump is not merely a caregiving aid but a sociotechnical actor that reorganizes the terms of maternal life. It mechanizes nourishment, disciplines time, and reconfigures maternal presence into measurable, transportable outputs. In doing so, it participates in

the production of maternal subjectivity, shaping how mothers come to know their bodies, responsibilities, and worth through data, efficiency, and institutional compliance. Yet this process is far from uniform. For mothers navigating racialized surveillance, economic precarity, or spatial exclusion, the pump magnifies longstanding inequities under the guise of empowerment. It renders maternal care legible to institutions while often detaching it from the embodied, relational rhythms that define early parenting. As Donna Haraway argues, technoscientific systems mediate life not only by extending capacity but by embedding it in regimes of calculation and control, where even the most intimate acts, such as feeding a child, are interfaced through logics of optimization (150). The breast pump, then, becomes a prosthetic of care and a prosthetic of governance, tethering maternal labour to the demands of institutions while offering only partial relief from their pressures.

From Isolation to Interdependence: Breast Pumping and the Redistribution of Maternal Care

This section extends the interpretative analysis by focussing on how the breast pump enables not only individualized maternal labour but also new configurations of relational and collective care. While often discussed as a device of privatized productivity, the pump, in practice, can function as an instrument of redistribution. It enables mothers to circulate nourishment, delegate caregiving responsibilities, and blur the boundaries of maternal self-containment. In these ways, breast pumping unsettles the dominant narrative of maternal isolation and opens space for practices grounded in reciprocity, sharing, and mutual care.

One participant, identifying as an “overproducer,” described donating her surplus milk to another mother whose infant was experiencing feeding challenges: “Okay, so she’s my third baby. And even though I worked from home, I just made a lot more than she would eat. So I just pumped the rest and ended up donating it to another mom and babies who ... she, the mom, couldn’t produce milk. So that’s how I got into breast pumping” (participant two). Her account reframes milk not as personal excess but as a resource of mutual aid—a form of relational care extending beyond the nuclear family. This practice unsettles dominant ideologies of maternal containment and aligns instead with Joan Tronto’s ethic of care, which emphasizes attentiveness, responsibility, and responsiveness as social values (135). As the participant later shared, “It takes a village to raise kids ... and everybody’s village looks a little different. In this case, out of the extra milk supply” (participant two). Her language invokes a collectivist ethic resisting the neoliberal script of maternal self-sufficiency.

Yet it is important to note that such redistribution is not universally

accessible. The capacity to donate milk, store excess, or delegate feedings presumes a baseline of material stability, including access to refrigeration, predictable schedules, and supportive coparents. For some mothers, particularly those in low-wage or precarious employment, these conditions are out of reach. Economic insecurity often demands uninterrupted labour, leaving little time or space for the routines that make milk-sharing viable. Moreover, traditional gender expectations continue to place the burden of feeding and coordination primarily on mothers, even when redistribution is possible. In this way, milk-sharing practices, while framed as acts of mutual care, remain deeply shaped by structural asymmetries in income, labour flexibility, and domestic responsibility. Redistribution, then, reflects not only mutual aid but unequal access to the infrastructures that make such generosity possible.

Indeed, this form of redistribution is enabled by the pump's ability to sever the temporal and spatial tether between feeding and the maternal body. As Charlotte Faircloth argues, expressed milk becomes "a portable and tradable substance," circulating through social and economic networks (132). Participants described routines of labelling, freezing, and transporting milk; everyday practices through which maternal labour is encoded, extended, and exchanged. For another mother, redistribution included delegating feeding to her partner: "I was able to even rest, because my husband was able to take over, since there was enough milk in the fridge" (participant one). Yet even this act of rest is shaped by privilege; many working-class mothers, especially those navigating parenthood alone or without job flexibility, find such redistribution aspirational rather than attainable.

While wet nursing has historically served as one form of distributed maternal labour, participants' accounts suggest important differences. Wet nurses, often operating under exploitative, racialized, and classed labour arrangements, served as replacements rather than extensions of maternal care. In contrast, milk sharing among the mothers in this study was voluntary, peer-based, and ethically relational. It preserved maternal autonomy while extending maternal responsibility outwards. One participant explained the duality of donation and ongoing personal care: "Even on the nights she'd be up all night, I would still have to get up to pump. She eats on one side, and I'd have to pump the other because she never ate all that I made. So I had to" (participant two). Here, donation did not lessen her labour but reframed it, expanding the geography of maternal care while preserving the intimacy and responsibility of embodied practice.

These practices, however, were not without their emotional and physical costs. "Even when I didn't feel like getting up, I knew someone was depending on that milk" (participant two). Her words speak to how redistribution, while rooted in care, also generates new forms of obligation. Rather than relieving

pressure, the pump may simply redistribute it, translating maternal labour into forms that are more diffuse but no less demanding. For some, this labour is embraced as a meaningful extension of care; for others, it may compound already stretched capacities. Crucially, the emotional weight of these exchanges is shaped not only by personal ethics but by broader social norms valorizing maternal self-sacrifice and normalizing its invisibility, particularly among women navigating caregiving roles without institutional or relational buffers. In this way, the pump's facilitation of redistribution reveals less a liberation from labour than a reorganization of its load, rendering care more shareable, but not necessarily more supported.

Ultimately, the findings in this section complicate the conventional view of the breast pump as merely a tool of mechanized, privatized motherhood. Instead, participant accounts reveal the pump's dual capacity to reproduce and resist the individualization of maternal labour. By enabling the circulation of milk beyond the maternal body, the pump opens channels for shared responsibility, mutual aid, and relational caregiving. Yet these redistributive potentials are deeply conditioned by material circumstances, access to time, space, partners, and economic stability, and they are mediated by enduring gendered expectations around maternal self-sacrifice. In this light, the pump does not simply extend care but reconfigures its burdens and boundaries, often in uneven ways. As Nancy Fraser contends, when caregiving is relegated to the private sphere, its social and political dimensions are obscured ("Contradictions"). The practices described here resist that obscuration by making visible the infrastructures, negotiations, and inequities that shape maternal labour. The pump, then, is not only a disciplinary device but also a contested site of interdependence—one through which care circulates across households yet never fully escapes the asymmetries organizing its flow.

Towards a Feminist Ethics of Maternal Care

This study's interpretative findings complicate common assumptions about the nature of maternal care in technologically mediated, neoliberal contexts. Through the lens of the breast pump, motherhood emerges not as a fixed identity but as a practice that is continually negotiated, structured by institutions, mediated by machines, and shaped through relational, embodied labour. Technologies like the pump do not simply offer convenience; they actively reconfigure how care is conceptualized, distributed, and valued. The same device that allows mothers to rest, share responsibility, and extend care beyond their bodies also entangles them in regimes of productivity, surveillance, and discipline. This ambivalence is not simply a theoretical paradox but a policy challenge: How can institutions support caregiving without reducing it to efficiency metrics or individual responsibility?

Addressing this requires more than technological innovation; it demands workplace policies that honour care as a public good, including federally mandated paid leave, universal lactation accommodations, and flexible scheduling protections recognizing the embodied temporality of care. Understanding the contradictions at play necessitates a feminist ethics attuned to complexity, contradiction, and lived experience and one committed to transforming these structural conditions.

Across the narratives analyzed, breast pumps functioned as prosthetics of possibility and instruments of regulation. They enabled shared caregiving, provided a means of feeding across time and space, and created openings for rest and reciprocity within the family. At the same time, they imposed rigid temporal demands, fostered emotional fatigue, and introduced new expectations of consistency and self-monitoring. This duality underscores the limits of a technological fix for maternal care. As the participants' experiences reveal, technology cannot resolve the structural contradictions of contemporary motherhood; it can only help mothers endure them more efficiently. The deeper issue lies in how institutions offload the burden of reconciliation onto individual women, relying on technologies like the pump to bridge the unbridgeable: the gap between idealized caregiving and unsupportive labour conditions. Without coordinated policy responses—such as standardized enforcement of lactation protections, public investment in caregiving infrastructure, and expanded access to affordable childcare—maternal technologies risk becoming coping mechanisms rather than tools of transformation. In this light, the pump becomes emblematic not just of maternal adaptation but of systemic abdication.

Building on this critique, these findings suggest that what is needed is not more efficient maternal technology but a fundamental rethinking of the values and institutional frameworks that shape maternal labour. Too often, technologies like the pump are evaluated not by how they support mothers but by how seamlessly they allow care to conform to market logics: uninterrupted productivity, minimal disruption, and individualized problem solving. This alignment flattens maternal care into a task to be optimized rather than a relational practice embedded in interdependence, time, and embodied labour.

As Allison Pugh observes, we live in a culture that demands care be ever-present yet invisibly maintained—what she calls “the illusion of effortlessness” (97). Devices like the breast pump sustain this illusion by rendering maternal labour both hypervisible in its metrics and invisible in its emotional and physical tolls. When institutions valorize efficiency over care, they obscure the labour required to meet impossible standards of maternal presence, availability, and endurance. A feminist ethics would reject this concealment and instead foreground the asymmetries in who is expected to maintain the illusion, particularly mothers navigating caregiving without paid leave, health benefits,

or caregiving networks. The question, then, is not whether maternal technology works but for whom it works, under what conditions, and at what cost. In this sense, resisting mechanized care as a default solution requires challenging the structural precarity that renders it necessary in the first place.

Building on this politicized understanding of maternal technologies, a feminist future of maternal care must hold space for ambivalence—for the mother who relies on the pump but resents its demands and for the moments of liberation enabled by technology and the exhaustion that follows. It must also foreground values such as interdependence, dignity, and collective responsibility over autonomy, efficiency, and optimization. As Nancy Fraser reminds us, care is not a personal burden to be managed but a social good to be protected and shared (“After” 609). Reimagining maternal care as a public concern rather than a private struggle requires policies that move beyond individualized fixes and instead build collective supports. These policies might include federally subsidized childcare, universal parental leave, community-controlled rather than market-driven national milk banking systems, and legal recognition of caregiving labour in workplace evaluations and public assistance programs. Rather than asking how mothers can better adapt to the demands of fragmented systems, these measures would reconfigure the systems themselves—redistributing responsibility, recalibrating expectations, and embedding care within the architecture of social life.

This study has demonstrated that the breast pump, often dismissed as a mundane artifact of everyday parenting, is a revealing node in the political infrastructure of maternal life. As a technology that mediates care, compresses time, and distributes labour, the pump illuminates the broader structures through which gendered caregiving is managed, privatized, and made governable. The ambivalences mothers described—between autonomy and exhaustion, redistribution and burden—are not individual contradictions but structural effects. Framed through a reproductive justice lens, these findings insist that maternal care must be understood not only in terms of personal experience but also as a terrain of economic, racial, and gendered struggle. What is needed is not simply better-designed tools but a transformation in how care is valued, organized, and supported. This approach includes expansive policy commitments: universal paid leave, robust public investment in lactation and childcare infrastructure, protections for informal caregiving labour, and equitable access to maternal health technologies untethered from employment status or income. Ultimately, the breast pump is not just a symbol of maternal endurance. It is a reminder that just care requires just systems. And building those systems is a political imperative, not just a technological one.

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USOA GARCÍA SAGÜÉS

Collaborators in order of appearance:

Charmaine Beneyto, Eunjung Kim, Hannah Scott, Angele Lautier,
Maria Bacha, Izabela Beata Kuchta, Eileen Morley, Alison Dollery,
Tina Surridge, Lola Luk, and Annie Edwards

All Love Begins and Ends Here

I am an artist currently studying textiles at the Royal College of Art. My practice focusses on soft sculpture to tell an alternative motherhood story. This article offers meaningful glimpses into motherhood through original artworks from a recent college exhibition with the same title and supported by our student union, for which I was awarded to curate in March 2025. The open call asked artists to respond to a quote from Hettie Judah in her 2024 book Acts of Creation: “Long taboo, the realities of motherhood are now the subject of urgent discussion.” I believe I have never added as much value as being a mother. However, I have also never felt as lonely and overlooked. Through my curatorial choices, I wanted to highlight this paradox of motherhood and show that I am not alone.

While the virgin and child is one of the great subjects of European art, there is more to be expressed about motherhood as a lived complex experience, including themes of identity change, blurred boundaries, sacrificing the self, and retaining strength, patience, and grounding while fighting solitude, depression, worthlessness, and fear, as well as being often flooded with pride and joy. The show successfully explored the gifts and struggles of mothers—and of not becoming a mother—through fourteen works by twelve artists from programs across the college. To the collective world, mothers are only mothers but to so many individually they make the world. It was a pleasure to see the audience immersed in the artists’ stories. Their interest prompted me to write this article to sustain discussion around motherhood.

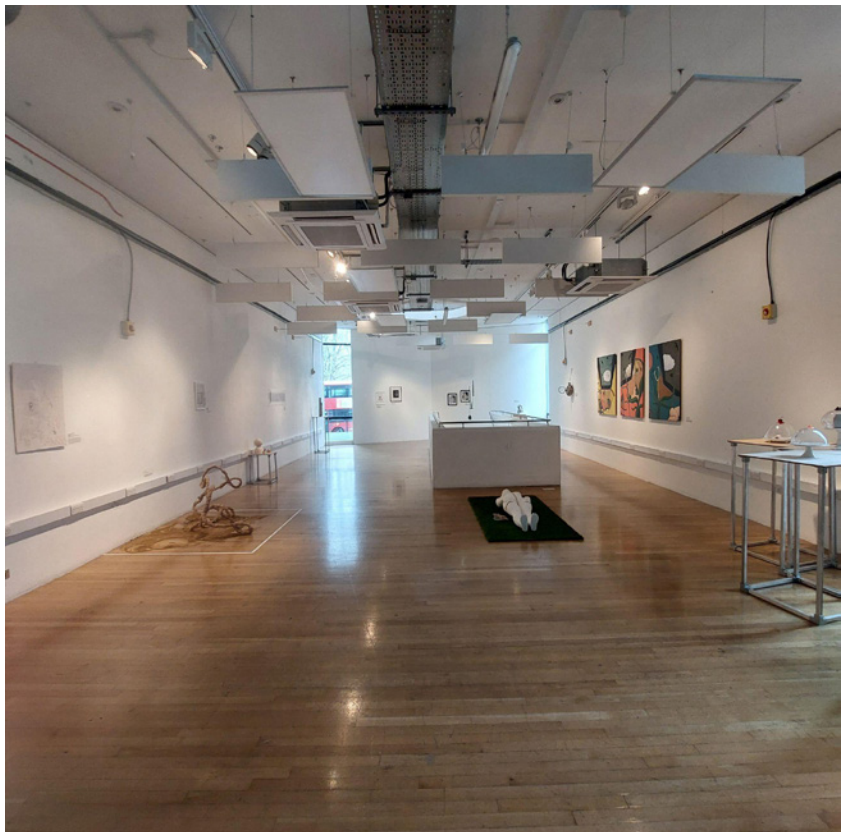


Figure 1: Upper Gulbenkian Hall, RCA 24 March 2025

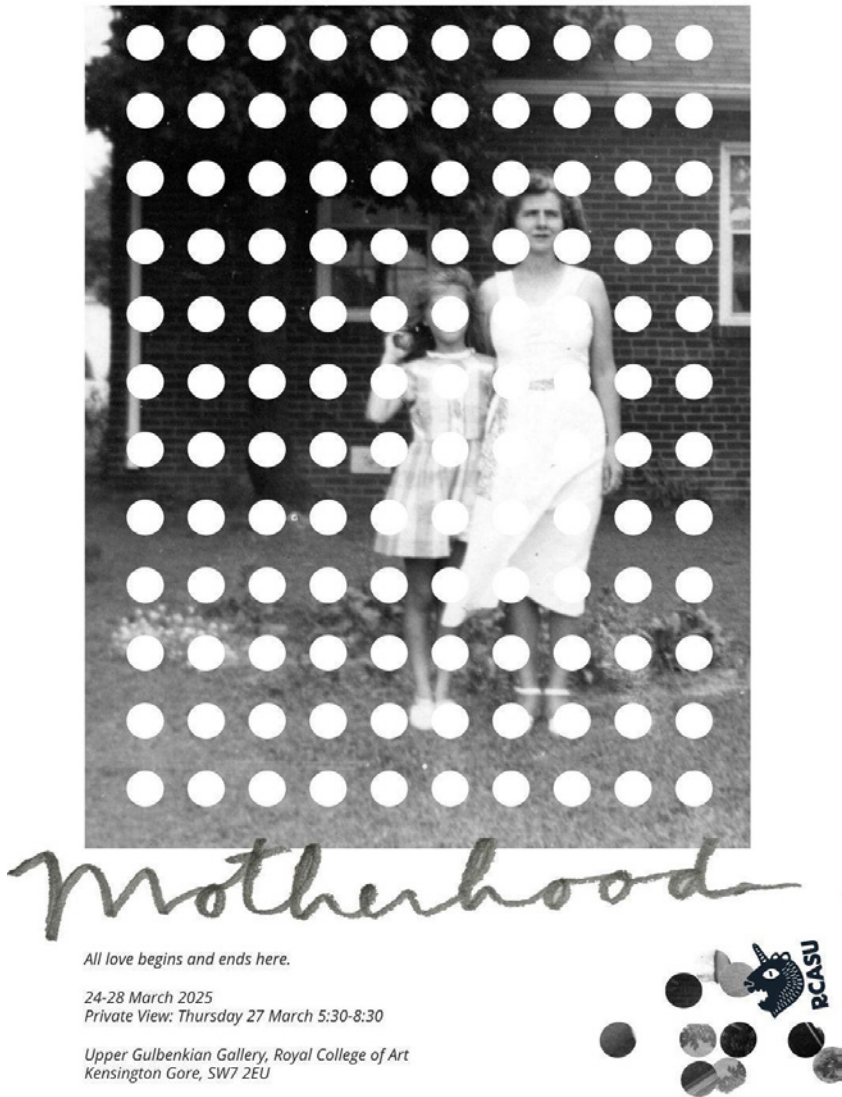


Figure 2: Exhibition poster by artist Eileen Morley

Artwork 1. Seeking Balance



I Never Knew Only Love Could Hurt Like This

Charmaine Beneyto

73x50cm Interior emulsion, wax crayon, graphite, baby blanket on wood

MA Contemporary Art Practice

@eniamranch

www.charmainebeneyto.com

“After the birth of my first child, I remember feeling this incredible amount of pressure. I didn’t know which way to turn. Everything that I knew had done a complete 180. I remember the term “mom brain” being branded about like a badge of initiation, as though it was funny, somewhat normal. I committed myself: I would return to my centre.

I Never Knew That Only Love Could Hurt Like This is an ode to the many times I have had to find a way to put my children to one side so that I can focus on finding myself again. There is a myth about mothers that for us to be good at it, we must be selfless. I don’t see it that way. The best thing I can do is show my children that honouring yourself is an act of pure love. This is where we find the balance, even if it is somewhat temporary. We must come back to ourselves again and again.”

While Charmaine Beneyto explores the internal struggle for balance, Eunjung Kim’s sculpture next examines how that struggle reshapes identity itself.

Artwork 2. From Self to Selfless



The Edge of Becoming

Eunjung Kim

75x80x42cm Metal wire and wool string covered by plaster

MA Sculpture

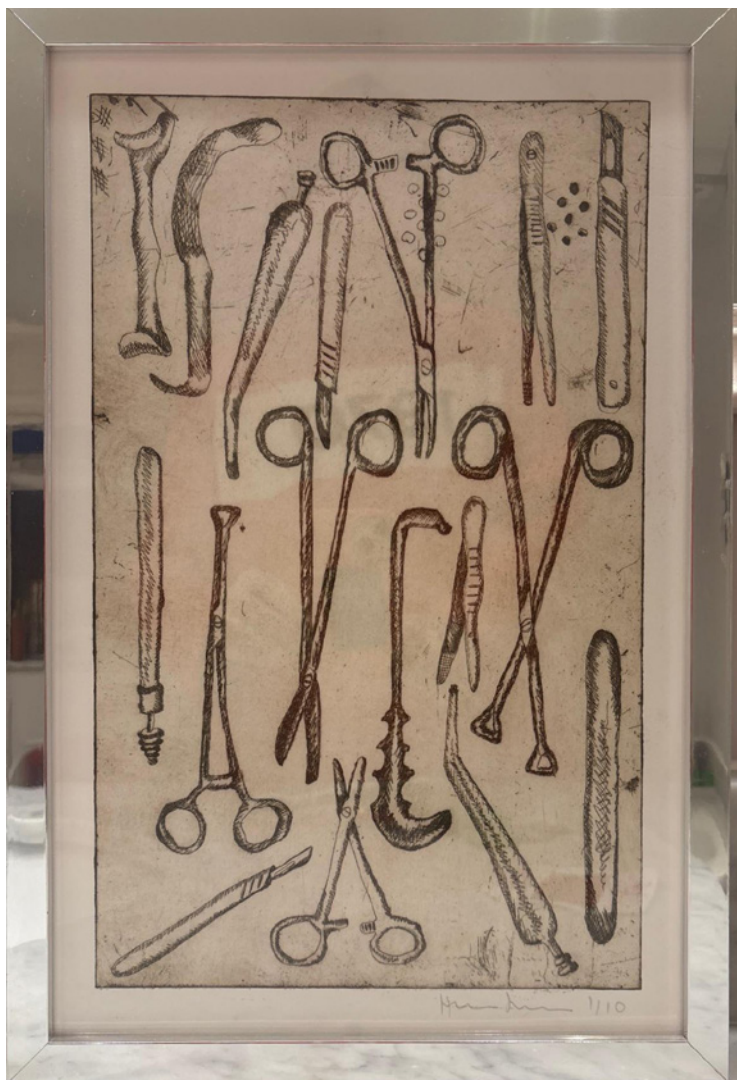
@ej_eunjungkim

“As a parent of two children, I am experiencing changes in my identity, struggling and growing as I transition from the boundaries of an individual to the position of a parent in the process of building a family community, which requires tempering my selfishness.

In this artwork, the aim was to capture the selfish yet selfless and individual yet communal human figure that a society of individuals is bound to have.”

Kim’s reflection on identity change upon motherhood is followed by Hannah Scott’s piece exploring the haunting of the unborn child, the impossible decision between family and career, and the realization that we cannot have it all.

Artwork 3. The Missing Child



Virginia's Shadow

Hannah Scott

40x27x2cm Etching on paper 1/10

MA Sculpture

@hannah.b.scott

www.hannahscottart.com

Etching of a hysterectomy set. “Across the broad continent of a woman’s life, falls the shadow of a sword”—Virginia Woolf

“The Unborn Child. There is a gap between the number of children they want and the number they have. The gap is highest in women with a higher education.”

“The Lost Career. The majority of women leave or demote their professions after having children. Most never regain the same pay or status.”

“They told us we could have it all. They didn’t tell us that we are damned if we do and damned if we don’t.”

In continuation of Scott’s work, Angele Lautier offers a more playful piece, taking us back to childhood memories of games under our mother’s watch.

Artwork 4. Childhood Memories



Childhood Memories

Angele Lautier

30x20x15cm Mixed media sculpture

MFA Arts & Humanities

@angele_lautier_artist

www.angelelautier.com

“The central figure is the mother around whom the two little figures play safely. This piece is interactive and encourages the audience to play with the figures, creating new configurations and narratives. It brings out the inner child of the participant and is reminiscent of playing with action figures and dolls from one’s childhood.”

Although most of the exhibition lets mothers do the talking, motherhood is also about daughters, and Maria Bacha’s poignant work next reflects on that physical and emotional distance that can build between mother and daughter.

Artwork 5. Bridging the Distance



Wild Cloud

Maria Bacha

25x35cm each of the 8, Photography

MFA Arts and Humanities

@theartofmariabacha

www.maria-bacha.com

“Wild Cloud is a heartfelt ode—a letter bridging the distance between a daughter, her mother, and her own evolving self. Created in the wake of the daughter’s arrival in London, it captures a tender yet powerful exploration of emotions, memories, and newfound horizons.

It consists of a series of eight photographs, each piece a composition of layered imagery, cyanotype, and text. Together, they form a cloud of memories and feelings, offering a glimpse into the complexities of love, care, identity, and motherhood.”

Next, exploring the topic of unpaid labour, which is later further discussed in the exhibition, my work from my *Mother Interrupted* series focuses on mothers as service providers.

Artwork 6. Mothers as Services



Mother's Back

Usoa García Sagués

10x10x60cm Card, knitted yarn and copper wire, electroformed
copper-knit basket

MA Textiles

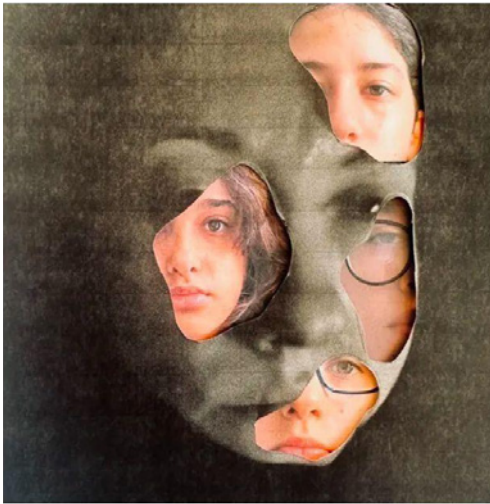
@usoa_textileartist

www.usoasculptedtextiles.com

“This work comes from my textile 3D collages series, which relies on mixing objects alluding to mothers’ body parts representing their services. In this piece, mothers are the backbone of the family and do most of the carrying. The pieces intend to be both celebratory of mothers’ attributes as well as provocative of the limited way in which society sees us. I use the collage approach because it is very much seen as a women’s activity and to reject more traditional media, as a sign against the established patriarchal system that undervalues mothers.”

From my piece, a natural progression to Izabela Beata Kuchta’s work, exploring the unrealistic expectations society places on mothers around the world.

Artwork 7. Unrealistic Expectations



Do You Want to Toy with Me? and *Motherhood*

Izabela Beata Kuchta

Collages on paper, A4

MFA Arts & Humanities

@explorer_1984

www.explorer1984.com

“My work illustrates the demands and unrealistic expectations put on women in contemporary society. Barbie is a global brand that has dominated the social imagination for six decades; she is also a fashionable doll, a toy, and an object of entertainment, pleasure, and fun, to be played with and placed back on the shelf once used and no longer needed. The symbol of the unrealistic expectations, the unnatural and unmaintainable aesthetics, highlights the unconsciously shared social values, as well as the dominance of a narrow and superficial understanding. Is Barbie independent and empowered or overwhelmed and exploited? The work advocates for the recognition of domestic labour as a form of work.”

The face collage is inspired by Elisabeth Gilbert’s quote, “Having a baby is like getting a tattoo on your face,” and is informed by the artist’s own challenging experiences of raising four children as a single mom. The work illustrates the sacrifices, the unseen, consistent, and unrecognized effort, and the personal expense the mother must pay to provide for her children, that corrodes and compromises her wellbeing.”

From Kuchta’s unrealistic expectations affecting the wellbeing of mothers, we move to Eileen Morley’s work on the importance of caring for oneself.

Artwork 8. Caring for Your Care



All things separate, peculiarly united

Eileen Morley

7x12x296cm Cotton, tampon, pad, container of mascarpone

MA Textiles

@eieileenmorley

www.eileenmorley.com

“A tampon, a pad, and an empty container of mascarpone are united through a machine-knit cord and hand-knit pockets. No visible seams link these objects—only my mind and the fact that they all came to me in the same week.

From this strange collection was born a piece that is not about menstruation but the care of our care products and the imperceptible cords that connect one thing to another.”

Using the body as a canvas, the next work, by Alison Dollery, explores the transformations of the pregnant body.

Artwork 9. A Body Transforms



Matrescence Series

Alison Dollery

Real body canvas & background

MFA Arts & Humanities

@alisondolleryartist

www.alisondollery.com

“Exploring author Lucy Jones’s literature *Matrescence*, this silhouette/figure of the pregnant painted body is used as a canvas.

Although the pregnant body is the most natural transformation the body can go through, public breastfeeding and places mothers can go while caring for babies have social restrictions, where mothers face judgment. These are feminist material aesthetics, which have been manufactured through our bodies.”

The next exhibition piece is my own and shifts focus to a baby in a folded form from my *Mother-Infant* series, highlighting the strength of a softer world.

Artwork 10. The Mother-Baby Bond



Petra and Carolina

Usoa García Sagués

Baby wrap 40 cm tall. Sports jersey, paper, knitted copper wire, cotton batting, lace & pearls

MA Textiles

@usoa_textileartist

www.usoasculptedtextiles.com

“This work comes from my folded quilts series. I use copper in my knits because it originates from the earth’s crust and conducts electricity, representing the spark of life; its shine and rigidity compensate for the muteness and softness of the quilts’ fabrics. I fold the quilts into forms because folding is a domestic activity also connected to raising infants, as mothers have been wrapping babies in folds for centuries. My folded forms are fragile but fierce, grounded but growing, and speak of the importance of the mother-infant bond.”

The maternal bond is strong and eternal, as highlighted also by Tina Surridge’s next work.

Artwork 11. Eternal Bonds



Mother and Child

Tina Surridge

Oyster shell size. Ceramic

MA Sculpture

@tina_surridge_

“A single parent of four, grandmother of six.

An eternal bond.

My soul has shared each heartbreak, and your success has made me smile.
Each fear has swept my light away, if only for a while.

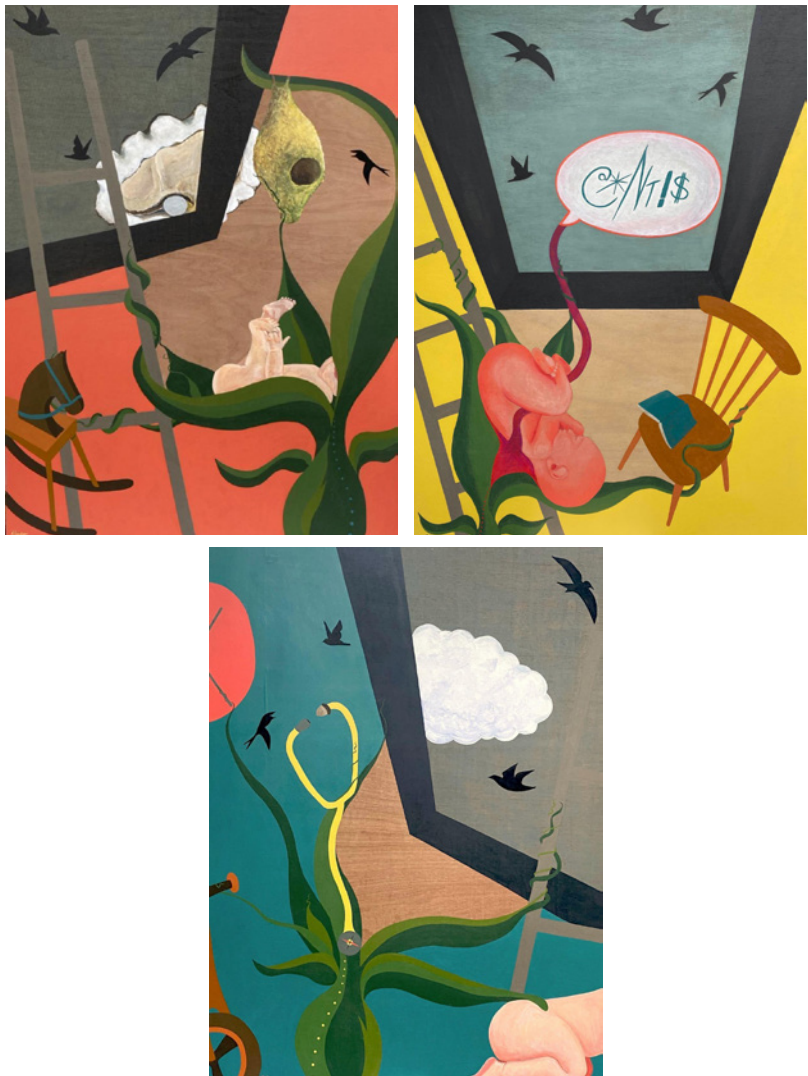
Some absences are hard to bear, and some choices were not right. Some
health scares changed our inner souls, so proud you fought the fight.

I will stand by forevermore, your mother to the end.

Forgive me my inequities, my child, my soul, my friend. Rejoice in all our
family bonds, the reaching goals and laughter, these intertwining hearts of
love, a happy ever after.”

We move next to consider family harmony through a triptych of paintings
from Angele Lautier reflecting on progression, roots, and freedom.

Artwork 12. Family Harmony



Holon Triptych

Angele Lautier

122x90cm each. Acrylic on wood float mounted

MFA Arts & Humanities

@angele_lautier_artist

www.angelelautier.com

“Holon is the chosen title for this triptych, as it means that each painting can stand alone, and equally be part of the whole. The paintings prompt a dialogue between themselves, focussing on the shared themes using a similar colour palette. A strong narrative of growth and progression exists as you move from one piece to another and brings to mind different perspectives on family, education, religion, health, freedom, and harmony.”

But Lautier’s harmony doesn’t come for free, which leads well into our next artist Lola Luk, whose work considers whether our altruism in the name of family can eventually eat us up.

Artwork 13. Invisible Labour



Organic Altruism, It's a Lot on My Plate, and What Is Eating You Up?

Lola Luk

60x22x22cm. Ceramic, blown glass, resin

45x25x 25cm. Ceramic, blown glass, resin, pill, prescription.

45x25x25cm Ceramic, blown glass, resin

MA Sculpture

@luk_lola www.lolaluk.com

“My work reflects the intricate balance women navigate between selflessness and identity, shedding light on the invisible labour of caregiving and the societal biases that overshadow their contributions. It delves into the raw emotional landscapes of anxiety, mental health, and the sacrifices often rendered invisible. Through symbolic and tactile forms, I aim to challenge ingrained stereotypes, offering a poetic reflection on the complexities of motherhood and inviting deeper empathy for the unseen strength within these roles.”

The exhibition tour finishes with work from Annie Edwards. Her synthetic sculpture invites us to question what is natural, particularly given modern society and changing family structures, and how we can deal with tensions between intimacy and isolation and feelings of unrealized potential.

Artwork 14. Biological Clock



Synthetic Promise

Annie Edwards

2 x 1.5m. PLA, Polymer Clay, Resin, Vacuum Packed Pregnancy Tests, Astro Turf

MA Sculpture

@a_knee___

www.anniedwards.com

“Synthetic Promise delves into the complex realities of motherhood, confronting themes of personal grief, unrealized potential, and the societal expectations placed on the female body. Juxtaposing the natural and synthetic, hope and loss, and the tension between intimacy and isolation, the work symbolizes the stress and societal pressure of the ticking biological clock.”

In conclusion, a lot has changed and will continue to change. However, to nourish, protect, keep warm, and hold fast beyond reason seems still set to remain the foundation of human culture, which sublimates life to a higher reality without losing our bond to the natural world. Perhaps we need to arrive at a synthesis that better includes, values, and respects this more feminine side so future mothers can further enjoy motherhood.

The Moms Are Alright: Subverting Motherhood in Crisis in *Night Raiders*, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, and *All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt*

*Present yet often relegated to the margins of the image or narrative (or both), the cinematic mother is historically a site of crisis (Fischer 30). In North American cinema, she is also historically a heterosexual white woman. The films *Night Raiders* (Danis Goulet, 2021), *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, 2022), and *All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt* (Raven Jackson, 2023) transform the cinematic mother figure from an absent presence to a central and visible element of their stories. They also destabilize the white supremacy of the cinematic mother figure by presenting matrifocal narratives of a Cree mother (Niska, *Night Raiders*), a Chinese American immigrant mother (Evelyn, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*), and African American mothers (Mack and Evelyn, *All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt*). These films subvert the cinematic tradition of representing motherhood in crisis by locating the crisis outside of motherhood (*Night Raiders*), presenting crisis as something experienced by a mother rather than solely her children (*Everything Everywhere All at Once*), and rejecting crisis in favour of a meditative, poetic approach to motherhood (*All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt*). By employing a matrifocal approach to narrative, cinematography, and editing, each film pushes against monstrous mother tropes that are pervasive in North American cinema. Finally, by presenting positive images of mothers that deviate from normative motherhood, both in identity and in practices, the films also render visible the absurdity and impossibility of the institution of motherhood as defined by Adrienne Rich.*

Introduction: Cinema and Motherhood in Crisis

In *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama*, E. Ann Kaplan writes: “The Mother was in [a] sense everywhere—one could hardly discuss anything without falling over her—but always in the margins, always not the topic per se under consideration” (3). Examining the connection between nineteenth-century literary mothers and their twentieth-century onscreen counterparts, Kaplan locates the cinematic mother figure as an absent presence (3). Present yet often relegated to the margins of the image or narrative (or both), the cinematic mother is also historically a site of crisis (Fischer 30). Lucy Fischer, in her seminal text *Cinematernity*, observes how mothers are blamed for the impact of their transgressions on their children: the mother’s sins are passed down to their child, the mother fails in their role by raising a deviant child, or the mother’s experience of birthing and raising children is defined by “hysteria and anxiety” (30). Publishing this work in the late 1990s, Fischer notes that some filmmakers had begun to recentre the mother and offer narratives pushing against this patriarchal equation of motherhood and crisis.

Using Kaplan’s and Fischer’s texts as an entry point, I examine how motherhood and crisis are represented in contemporary North American cinema. I analyze three films released in North America between 2021 and 2023: *Night Raiders* (Goulet), *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (Kwan and Scheinert), and *All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt* (Jackson). Employing matrifocal narratives, each of these films subverts the historical screen representation of motherhood as a site of crisis in three distinct ways. *Night Raiders* offers a nuanced perspective of motherhood in crisis by locating the source of this crisis in systemic colonial violence, whereas *Everything Everywhere All at Once* depicts crisis as something experienced by a mother rather than as something inflicted upon her children. Furthermore, it celebrates crisis as part of the messy, complex nature of the mother role and the mother-daughter relationship. *All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt*, meanwhile, refuses to depict motherhood in crisis. Instead, it offers an intricate and peaceful meditation on the experience of mothering.

I begin my examination of these films by laying a theoretical groundwork that bridges theories of motherhood with theories of cinema and media. I position the concepts of matrifocality (O’Reilly), the institution of motherhood (Rich), and controlling images (Collins) with the monstrous mother (Palko) and the cinematic good-bad mother dichotomy (with particular attention to the subgenre of mommy horror) (Arnold). I then discuss the significance of each film and present their matrifocal narratives of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of colour) mothers: a Cree mother (Niska from *Night Raiders*), a Chinese American immigrant mother (Evelyn from *Everything Everywhere*

All at Once), and African American mothers (Mack and Evelyn from *All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt*). Portraying these mothers with positivity, nuance, and care, these films destabilize the white supremacy of the institution of motherhood. I also briefly note the importance of the films' respective critical reception and popular praise upon release. I then chart how each film subverts the traditional representation of motherhood in crisis. I conclude that by presenting positive images of mothers deviating from normative motherhood (in identity and practices), these films render visible the absurdity and impossibility of the institution of motherhood as defined by Adrienne Rich. Furthermore, by employing a matrifocal approach to narrative, cinematography, and editing, each film pushes against monstrous mother tropes that are pervasive in North American cinema.

Centring the Mother: Institutions, Images, and Monsters

Coined by Andrea O'Reilly, a matrifocal narrative "is one in which a mother plays a role of cultural and social significance" (O'Reilly and Green 16). The term "matrifocal," drawn from the work of Miriam Johnson, describes an approach to mothers and motherhood that is valuable and central to the operation of things (qtd. in O'Reilly and Green 226). For the societies Johnson studied, the image of the mother was "culturally elaborated and valued" (qtd in O'Reilly and Green 226). Mothers, however, were also central to these societies' economic and governmental structures. Matrifocality, therefore, necessarily includes centring motherhood culturally and structurally. Applying this to narratives, O'Reilly asserts that matrifocal narratives infuse motherhood both in theme and plot structure (O'Reilly and Green 16). In so doing, matrifocal narratives highlight the value of experiences of motherhood and practices of mothering.

Rich separates these experiences of motherhood from what she calls the "institution of motherhood." "The institution," she argues, "aims at ensuring that [mothers'] potential—and all women—shall remain under male control" (60). Rich refers to the institution as a pillar of our broader social, political, and cultural systems. The institution primarily serves to support, and is thus upheld by, patriarchy because it works to control how, where, when, and why women mother (as a practice and role). Rich's theorization of the institution can be further deepened when considering race, class, and sexuality. Colonialism, white supremacy, and heteronormativity mobilize the institution of motherhood to harm mothers who inhabit marginalized identities. Patricia Hill Collins's work on controlling images helps to understand how the institution uses forms of media to harm marginalized mothers.

Collins defines controlling images as those that mobilize negative stereotypes to "make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice

appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (69). Collins discusses controlling images specifically about the treatment of Black women in media. Stereotypes such as the mammy, matriarch, welfare queen, and hot momma are used as justification for the oppression of Black women (Collins 69). Collins writes that elite groups, who are made elite by white supremacist and colonial structures, recognize the power in defining societal values and, as such, exploit existing symbols and create new ones to manipulate ideas about Black women (69). One form of a controlling image is that of the monstrous mother.

Abigail Palko describes the monstrous mother as part of a narrative that deforms the experience and perception of motherhood by exerting “external pressure on mothers and their mothering practices” (639). The trope of the monstrous mother simultaneously locates social anxieties within mother figures and absolves the external community of supporting mothering practices (640). Palko importantly specifies that contemporary versions of the monstrous mother “are highly racialized and classed,” which, in turn, reflects social anxieties about who is allowed to be a mother or is capable of mothering (640). Another function of contemporary monstrous motherhood that Palko notes is the role of surveillance. In addition to people’s eyes, there is now a camera lens on every corner. From smartphones to home and business security cameras, the possibility of being recorded and labelled as a “bad mother” for deviating from normative mothering practices (as defined by the institution) is extremely high. Cinema, as an audio-visual medium, is another avenue through which controlling images of the good and bad mother uphold the expectations of the institution of motherhood.

Sarah Arnold examines the function of the good mother and bad mother in post-1960s American horror cinema. While the mother figure is present across genres, horror cinema in particular boasts enough depictions of monstrous mothers to warrant a subgenre called “mommy horror.” Arnold determines that horror cinema is interested in the mother “as a site of both fascination and repulsion” (1). Through this dichotomy, horror cinema perpetuates an idealized or essential motherhood (Arnold 4; Harrington 213). This is also referred to as normative motherhood, which is based on a conception of mothers as “white, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, married, and in a nuclear family with usually one to two children” (O’Reilly 629). O’Reilly identifies ten dictates of normative motherhood; they include placing maternity at the core of female identity, relegating motherwork to the home, identifying motherwork as the individual responsibility of the mother alone, advocating that maternity is inherently natural to all women, and believing mothering is private and nonpolitical (O’Reilly 629). Any mothers who deviate from these expectations, in practice and identity (such as racialized, queer, trans, nonbinary, single, and nongestational), are inherently

abnormal and therefore bad or monstrous. As a result of cinema's historic perpetuation of normative motherhood and its impossible-to-achieve standards, onscreen mothers and motherhood are often "ambivalently framed as always-already monstrous" (Harrington 215).

BIPOC Matrifocality and Disrupting the Institution of Motherhood

Each of the chosen films is significant, as they provide matrifocal narratives for mothers of marginalized identities. These mothers are portrayed with positivity, nuance, and care. None of them are eternally condemned for their mothering practices or depicted as total failures in their roles as mothers. These films, therefore, inherently destabilize the white supremacy of the institution of motherhood, which is even more significant considering that each received critical and/or popular praise upon their release. *Night Raiders* was selected for several film festivals, including the Toronto International Film Festival, and received multiple Canadian film accolades. *Everything Everywhere All at Once* was globally successful at the box office and won seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Actress for Michelle Yeoh's portrayal of Evelyn. *All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt* also played the festival circuit, including the 2023 Sundance Film Festival, and was nominated for numerous awards, including Best First Feature at the 2024 Independent Spirit Awards. The fact that these films received this kind of reception for stories depicting racialized mothers within a good mother framework is something to be celebrated; this, however, is just the surface. My analysis demonstrates how each of these films uses narrative and form to render the institution of motherhood visible, pushing against traditional cinematic images of monstrous mothers.

Motherhood Forced into Crisis: Matrifocal Narrative and Systems of Oppression in *Night Raiders*

Night Raiders subverts the cinematic tradition of motherhood in crisis by employing a matrifocal narrative that locates the source of this crisis in systemic colonial violence. Set in a future North America, the film follows Niska (Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers), a Cree woman navigating the aftermath of a fictional civil war with her daughter, Waseese (Brooklyn Letexier-Hart). The two live in the woods outside the city to evade the military occupation, a de facto representation of colonial power that forces all children to attend its state-run institutions. Referencing the histories of residential schools, these institutions violently force assimilation and erase all cultural knowledge and memory from these children.

The beginning of the film formally positions the audience to follow Niska's perspective. In the opening scene, Waseese becomes injured in a bear trap. After they get back to their trailer, the camera focusses solely on Niska. A series of medium long shots, medium shots, and medium close-ups follow her as she tends to a feverish Waseese. Many of these shots are also longer takes, allowing us to sit with Niska in real time as she enacts her mothering practice. The camera continues to follow her as a whirring sound indicates an incoming military drone. Niska warns Waseese and runs outside to shoot down the drone, the camera keeping her in the centre frame. As she aims towards the sky, the camera shifts to a low-angle shot that leaves Niska in the foreground and highlights the drone in the deepest plane of the image. This scene is the film's first indication that Niska's motherhood is in crisis at the hands of colonial violence. By centring Niska visually, we are positioned to follow her experience of mothering alongside her. Thus far, her mothering has predominantly been a response to physical manifestations (read: crises) of colonial violence—that is, the bear trap and the surveillance drone. The film continues to locate this crisis of motherhood in colonial violence through its narrative.

Waseese's injury worsens with an infection. There is no way to access the required medicine within the city without getting caught and revealing Waseese's evasion of the state-run schools. Niska is forced to choose between keeping Waseese—risking her death—or giving her up to the state; in other words, continuing to mother Waseese on her terms or relinquishing her practice of mothering to the state. Once again, Niska's motherhood is in crisis, not because the objective role of motherhood is inherently in crisis but because colonial powers have forced her into an impossible situation. Roberta, an old friend who gave up her son to the state, says to Niska: "You looked after her when she needed her mother most. Do you really want her to be stuck here? We have no way out, but not her. My son has so much more there than I can ever give him here. More than Waseese can ever have here." Due to Waseese's worsening illness, Niska relents and alerts nearby authorities to the presence of a minor outside the school walls. Here, the schools and military government represent the institution of motherhood. In terms of their postwar society, Niska is a bad mother for raising her daughter outside of their mandated curriculum and environment. She is also a bad mother, however, for abandoning her daughter to the state, knowing that they will lose contact. Akin to the tradition of motherhood in crisis on screen, Niska is punished for deviating from the institution's definition of a good mother. Instead of this being the film's climax, however, this is how it begins; throughout the rest of the film, we see Niska try to find and eventually rescue Waseese from the school. By depicting the impossibility of Niska's choice and maintaining her perspective in her journey back to Waseese, the film makes clear that Niska's

motherhood is in crisis because of the colonial systems working against her. Blame and judgment are not placed on her as a mother but rather on the systems of violence that oppress her.

By employing a matrifocal narrative, *Night Raiders* trades colonial images of Indigenous mothers as monstrous for more authentic, nuanced images of Indigenous mothers as complex and valued figures. Reflecting on how colonialism functions against Indigenous communities, Sarah Carter and Myra Rutherdale note how Indigenous mothers were immediately constructed by white settler societies as “lacking in discipline, promiscuous, and in need of training” (qtd. in Brant and Anderson 774). Narratives that Indigenous women were unfit and uncivilized were developed to demean and demonize Indigenous mothers, thereby justifying the colonial project (Brant and Anderson 774). *Night Raiders* rejects these types of controlling images by portraying Niska as capable, resourceful, and always prioritizing her daughter’s needs—the opposite of these stereotypes. The film’s matrifocality, therefore, pushes against colonial narratives of monstrosity by demonstrating how Indigenous mothering must “be understood within a deep, tangled, and complicated history of genocidal attacks on those who physically, culturally, and spiritually give life to the people” (Brant and Anderson 782).

Furthermore, Niska’s perspective, and subsequently her motherhood, is central to the film’s plot structure. Aside from two scenes depicting Waseese’s experience at the school, the audience spends the majority of the film with Niska. At the film’s end, it becomes clear that Niska’s deeper purpose was to deliver Waseese to an Indigenous community that remained (relatively) free from the military occupation. Waseese is determined to be the guardian about whom this community’s elders had prophesied. The plot, therefore, does not exist without Niska’s motherhood. It is her role as Waseese’s mother and her journey in raising and rescuing Waseese that moves the story forward; without Niska, there is no Waseese and no guardian. As such, spectators cannot avoid or cast off the portrayal of Niska’s motherhood. We are positioned to witness the nuance of Niska’s mothering practices and the complexity of her experience of motherhood against the violence of systemic colonialism.

Crisis as Maternal Experience: Matrifocal Form, Point of View, and *Everything Everywhere All at Once*

Everything Everywhere All at Once displaces the tradition of motherhood in crisis by portraying it as something experienced by a mother rather than only inflicted upon her children. The film also celebrates crisis as a natural part of the messy, complex nature of mothering and mother-daughter relationships. The film follows Evelyn, an owner of a laundromat, a daughter, a wife, and (most significantly) a mother. The audience meets Evelyn in a general state of

crisis. Her business is under threat of closure from an endless tax audit; her dismissive elderly father is now under her care at home due to his failing health; her husband cannot seem to keep up with the demands of their business and home life; and her relationship with her daughter is strained to the point of breaking. It is not just Evelyn's role as a mother that is in crisis but also her role as a wife, daughter, and business owner. As the narrative continues, we discover Evelyn is at the centre of a multiverse tied to her existence, and that she must fight a supernatural villain who threatens to destroy every universe in its wake. Since the plot centres around Evelyn, the narrative is already matrifocal and allows us to experience Evelyn's crisis from her perspective. The film goes further, however, by employing matrifocality in cinematography and editing to visually and audibly position the audience in Evelyn's point of view.

When Evelyn decides to first enter the multiverse, the camera is positioned in a medium close-up of her face. The camera is in shallow focus, allowing the background to blur and drawing the eyes of spectators to Evelyn in the centre frame. Evelyn engages the multiverse by clicking her earpiece. As her facial expression changes, the music fades into a mechanical synth and the camera's focus deepens the field of view behind Evelyn. The audience's visual and audible experience transforms alongside Evelyn's. In the next shot, Evelyn is magically pulled backwards with extreme force and speed. She remains in the centre of the frame as we watch her chair zoom through the tax office into a nearby custodian's closet. As Evelyn's world flies past her, so too does it fly by us as spectators. We also hear her muffled scream throughout, attaching us visually and audibly to Evelyn's perspective. As Evelyn crashes through the closet door, the frame splits into two parts: on the left side, we see Evelyn at the auditor's desk; on the right, we see Evelyn in the custodian's closet. The centre of the image blends each side, fracturing Evelyn's body into two separate yet simultaneous spaces. By presenting multiple Evelyns in one image, the film visually represents how she inhabits several roles beyond being a mother: a wife, a business owner, a daughter, an immigrant, a taxpayer, and a citizen. In other words, the film visually supports the narrative's assertion that Evelyn is more than just a mother. By centring Evelyn visually in the frame and generating the audio from her perspective, the film also employs matrifocality in its form. We are not only attuned to Evelyn's perspective narratively; we also see and hear what she sees and hears, experiencing the world as she does. Therefore, as Evelyn experiences crisis—in her motherhood, in her marriage, in her business—we, too, experience it as she does. In this way, the film presents crisis as something experienced by a mother rather than just her children. The film deepens this with its depiction of Evelyn's complicated relationship with her daughter, Joy.

At the film's start, it is clear that Evelyn and Joy are in conflict. One of Joy's first lines of dialogue is a warning to her girlfriend, Becky, for how Evelyn may speak to them: "I'm just telling you now in case my mom says something dumb, like you're fat or whatever." As the story progresses, it is revealed that the villain destroying the multiverse is an alternate version of Joy, originally known as Alpha Joy. Their first confrontation reveals the source of Alpha Joy's discontent:

Alpha Joy: I got bored one day and put everything on a bagel. Everything. All my hopes and dreams, my old report cards, every breed of dog, every last personal ad on Craigslist. Sesame. Poppy seed. Salt. And it collapsed in on itself. 'Cause, you see, when you really put everything on a bagel, it becomes this: the truth.

Evelyn: What is the truth?

Alpha Joy: Nothing matters.

Evelyn: No, Joy. You don't believe that.

Alpha Joy: Feels nice, doesn't it? If nothing matters, then all the pain and guilt you feel for making nothing of your life—it goes away.

As the dialogue reveals, the heart of the film's conflict is not simply the strained relationship between Evelyn and Joy. Instead, their experiences of crisis are mirrored in each other; both mother and daughter feel the impossible weight of failure placed on them. Alpha Waymond (a multiverse version of Evelyn's husband) initially tries to blame this on Alpha Evelyn, explaining that she pushed Alpha Joy beyond her mind's limits. Alpha Joy later tells Evelyn, "I know the joy and the pain of having you as my mother." Ultimately, however, Alpha Joy's pain is not located solely in her experience of being mothered. Evelyn comes to realize that she, too, shares all the same pain from her relationship with her father. Therefore, it is not inherently motherhood that is causing the film's conflict as much as it is the complexity of defining one's identity against clashing cultural, societal, and familial expectations. The film's attention to this complexity of defining oneself also highlights Evelyn's maternal ambivalence.

Sarah LaChance Adams defines maternal ambivalence as "the simultaneous and contradictory emotional responses of mothers towards their children—love and hate, anger and tenderness, pity and cruelty, satisfaction and rage" (LaChance Adams 613–14). One of the key orientations of this ambivalence is the conflict a mother experiences when she feels tension and opposition towards her children. This tension and opposition are a result of the mother's loss of their identity before motherhood. In her second confrontation with Alpha Joy, Evelyn declares, "I still know who I am." After spending time in

the multiverse and seeing all the various facets of her identity, the hopes and interests and possibilities of self, in addition to her motherhood, Evelyn can reaffirm her sense of self. By exploring the endless versions of herself, Evelyn is reacquainted with the “bodily integrity, freedom of movement, guilt-free work time, recreation ... and alone time” that she lost in motherhood (LaChance Adams 616). Evelyn’s affirmation defies the expectation set by the institution of motherhood that she is only a mother and nothing else.

Furthermore, by formally aligning audiences with Evelyn through cinematography and editing, the film positions them to embrace Evelyn’s perspective and root for her success. The film, therefore, encourages its spectators to celebrate both Evelyn’s maternal ambivalence and her defiance of the institution of motherhood, which is further cemented in the film’s ending. The penultimate scene shows Evelyn and Joy in every universe, with Evelyn trying to rescue Joy from destroying herself. The fight ceases as we return to the regular universe. While Joy laments the pain she feels in her relationship with Evelyn, the film lets Evelyn have the last word. Framed again in a close-up with a shallow focus that highlights her against the blurred background, Evelyn says the following: “Maybe it’s like you said, maybe there is something out there, some new discovery that’ll make us feel like even smaller pieces of shit. Something that explains why you still went looking for me through all of this noise. And why, no matter what, I still want to be here with you. I will always, always want to be here with you.” In this moment, the film acknowledges that “being a mother is emotionally and physically taxing and not always pleasant” (Harrington 214). By having Evelyn choose to embrace the crisis of her experience of motherhood—that is, the messy and sometimes painful experience of her mother-daughter relationship—the film explicitly presents this crisis, this ambivalence, as worthy of acceptance. By employing matrifocality in its form and thus positioning viewers to experience Evelyn’s crisis with her, the film transforms maternal ambivalence from something monstrous to something valid, natural, and meaningful.

Refusal of Crisis: Peaceful Meditations on Motherhood in *All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt*

All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt refuses to depict motherhood in crisis. Instead, it offers an intricate and peaceful meditation on the experience of mothering. The film follows Mack in her childhood, adulthood, and elder years in Mississippi. Narratively, the film employs matrifocality in depicting both Mack’s experience of being mothered and her own practices of mothering. One scene depicts a young Mack and her sister, Josie, spending time with their Grandma Betty. Throughout the scene, the camera remains still, and the frame shows only their hands. Grandma Betty’s hands are cupped, holding

pieces of clay dirt that Mack and Josie gradually take from her to eat. As they sit together, Grandma Betty shares this generational mothering practice with them:

Grandma Betty: My mom used to put a little bit of dirt in my hand. “This you,” she said.

Mack and Josie: This you, this you.

Grandma Betty: Dirt and water. Her mama had said the same to her. When it rain, it’s like it’s singing to you. You can smell it in the air. Taste the rain in the dirt.

Mack: Like earth?

Grandma Betty: Yeah, baby. Like earth. Rich. So rich.

This scene is one of many in which motherhood and mothering practices are central. Mack later mirrors this scene when she gives birth to Lily. With Josie at her side, Mack cradles the newborn and tells her, “You made of dirt, you know that? And water.” Matrilocality is further engaged by the plot’s nonlinear structure. The film slowly waltzes back and forth between different periods and spaces of Mack’s life. Each vignette is tied together by her experiences of motherhood and mothering, which is never portrayed in crisis.

Mothering practices are mirrored again in a sequence that compares Mack and her mother, Evelyn. The sequence begins with a close-up of Mack’s hands caressing her pregnant belly while she is in the bathtub. The sequence is crosscut with a memory of finding her mother on the ground in a rainstorm during her childhood. The sound is diegetic in both spaces, connecting the water from the running tap to the rain from the memory. It is eventually confirmed that this memory is of Evelyn’s untimely death. While her mother’s death is inherently sorrowful, the film does not present it as a sin or transgression—that is, Evelyn’s death does not translate into a narrative about her neglect or absence from her daughters’ lives. Instead, the crosscutting vignettes allow for a meditation on the relationship between mothering and grief. In a later sequence, we see Evelyn in the bathtub with Mack as a toddler. Again, the camera remains in close-up, moving across the tub as Evelyn washes Mack the way Mack later washes her belly. The mirroring of these scenes demonstrates how Evelyn’s mothering practices were passed down to her daughter, despite her passing at a young age.

The film’s refusal to depict motherhood in crisis is also deeply embedded in its presentation of othermothering. Collins defines othermothering, a central practice in Black communities, as the process by which “othermothers” help

biological mothers raise their children with “caring patterns that are culturally familiar” (qtd. in Kuroczycka Schultes and Vallianatos 793). In the third act, Mack has become pregnant but does not wish to be a mother. As Mack and Josie sit on the porch of their childhood home, Mack explains her choice: “I always knew she was yours. Even when I didn’t. I thought I could, but I can’t. And I know you can. She’d be good with you, Josie. I know that.” When Josie asks who this child will be to Mack, the camera cuts to a close-up of Mack again, caressing her pregnant belly. The camera then cuts back to a medium shot of both sisters as Mack replies: “My sister’s child.” The sisters remember their mother and then repeat the word “mama” to each other, as if in affirmation that both of them will be mothers to this child. The sequence ends with them resting on each other’s shoulders.

Mack’s refusal to be the primary caregiver for this child is not presented as a moment of crisis. Instead, the film allows her the space and time to affirm what kind of motherhood she feels is right for her. While there are conflicting emotions about the choice, particularly from the father of the child, no character passes judgment or shame on Mack. Although Mack experiences some sorrow about the life she and this man could have had together, she remains ultimately happy and confident in her choice, which the film makes clear in the penultimate scene. Mack and Lily are framed together in a medium close-up, sitting on the porch and watching the rain. A beautiful orchestral score quietly swells, eventually blending with the sound of the raindrops and Mack’s voice as she teaches Lily about forms of water. The scene offers a peaceful, poetic depiction of Mack and Lily’s relationship. In this way, the film subverts the cinematic tradition of motherhood in crisis and disrupts the institution of motherhood. Instead of offering the mother as primary caregiver in a heteronormative nuclear family, the film celebrates othermothering and communal mothering practices.

The film’s refusal to portray motherhood in crisis is further significant when considering the relationship between cinema and images of Black women. Returning to Collins, the dominant structures of white supremacy and colonialism have historically infused cinema with stereotypes of Black women, such as the mammy and the welfare queen. These images were used to vilify and thus control Black women in society. In response to this history, bell hooks discusses the oppositional gaze, in which Black viewers—and especially Black women—transform their act of looking (watching films) into a form of resistance (116). By refusing to identify with harmful representations of themselves on the screen, Black women fundamentally change the nature of cinematic spectatorship (as conceived by foregrounding film theorists). We can read writer and director Jackson’s refusal to perpetuate stereotypes and to depict Black motherhood in crisis as another response to this history. *All Dirt*

Roads Taste of Salt trades harmful controlling images of Black women for positive and authentic ones. From a perspective of motherhood, the film challenges controlling images of Black women as monstrous mothers with images of positive, authentic Black motherhood. Instead of the white supremacist, colonial forces Collins writes about, it is now Jackson who mobilizes the power of media to define societal values—in this case, presenting Black mothers as worthy, complex, and valuable.

Conclusion: The Moms Are, or Can Be, Alright

In the first chapter of her seminal book *Of Woman Born*, Rich asserts that she was haunted by the visual and literary media portraying motherhood as a singular identity built upon unconditional love for their children (72). Rich asks: “If I knew parts of myself existed that would never cohere to those images, weren’t those parts then abnormal, monstrous?” (72). The films *Night Raiders*, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, and *All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt* answer Rich’s question with a resounding “no.” By employing matrifocality in narrative and form, these films bring the experience of motherhood and practices of mothering to the forefront. They transform the cinematic mother figure from an absent presence to a central and visible element of their stories. They subvert the cinematic tradition of representing motherhood in crisis by locating the crisis outside of motherhood (*Night Raiders*), presenting crisis as something experienced by a mother rather than solely her children (*Everything Everywhere All at Once*), and rejecting crisis in favour of a meditative, poetic approach to motherhood (*All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt*). The matrifocality of these films and their subversions of motherhood in crisis also push against monstrous mother tropes, which are pervasive in cinema. By presenting positive images of mothers that deviate from normative motherhood, both in identity and in practices, the films render visible the absurdity and impossibility of the institution of motherhood as defined by Rich.

The analysis presented here is only a starting point into the rich possibilities that these films present. The cultural identities of each mother demand further examination beyond the scope of this article. For example, one could examine the role of elders and Indigenous mothering practices in *Night Raiders* and how the film presents Cree traditions against a colonial history and present. Another point of inquiry lies in the experience of mothering and being mothered for immigrant Chinese mothers and their first-generation Chinese American children in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. And *All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt* could be studied concerning its exploration of mothering and communal responsibility in Black communities in the American South. These films are rich with possibility and serve as proof of

the power of matrifocality in cinema; for it is with these images, ones that refute the institution of motherhood and depict motherhood in all its nuance and complexity, that mothers can affirm they are not abnormal or monstrous—just human.

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Australian Sole Mothers and the Life Course: Risks, Needs, and Policy Opportunities

Divorce is now a stage in the life course of many parents in Western countries. However, women continue to shoulder the burden of risk arising from parenthood and relationship breakdown, resulting in financial insecurity in the lives of sole mothers. While paid work has been heralded as a way by which social ills like poverty might be addressed, the truth is more complex for women parenting alone. This article draws on data from a study on perceptions of sole mother poverty and welfare, exploring online responses to Australian news stories published on the Gillard government's sole parent welfare amendments. Drawing on Carol Bacchi's method for policy analysis, it analyzes the policy implications of sole mothers' accounts of hardship, welfare, paid work, and caregiving during a period of intense welfare debate. These accounts highlight situations of insecure work and housing, difficulties accessing formal and informal childcare, the incompatibility of casual work and long employment hours with primary caregiving, the importance of government income support as a safety net, and the underpayment and nonpayment of child support. Accordingly, this article argues for more responsive and expansive policy measures that consider the employment, housing, welfare, and caregiving needs and circumstances of sole mothers, as well as greater policy recognition of caregiving.

Divorce and separation have become part of the life course of many individuals in Western societies, reflecting processes of individualization¹ (Parke). Contributing to this transformation were the divorce law reforms of the twentieth century, which made it easier for people to exit their marriages (Fahey). In Australia, it has been fifty years since the introduction of no-fault divorce (Australian Institute of Family Studies), yet women continue to shoulder the burden of risk arising from parenthood and relationship breakdown. The cumulative impacts of parenthood and relationship breakdown (or partner absence or death) include deteriorated financial, health, and mortality

outcomes not only in the years immediately following relationship separation but also across the life course of sole mothers (Benzeval; Burström et al.; Sabbath et al.; Zagel and Hubgen).

While paid work has been heralded as a way by which social ills like poverty might be addressed, the truth is more complex for sole mothers, especially those with low educational attainment, young mothers, and those who are single when they give birth (Lorentzen and Syltevik). In Australia, the poverty rate among sole parent households, which women mostly head, remains high despite an increase in the workforce participation rate of sole mothers (Australian Bureau of Statistics, “FM1”; Australian Bureau of Statistics, “Labour Force Status”; Australian Council of Social Services, “Poverty in Australia”; Australian Council of Social Services, “Trends in Poverty”). These statistics point to policy failures and shortcomings, including a lack of recognition by Welfare to Work (WTW) of sole mothers’ work-care realities and preferences (Campbell et al.; Cook and Noblet).

WTW forms part of an era in welfare policy that emerged across the Western world from the 1980s and 1990s (Wolfinger, “From Harlots” 56). As part of these reforms, eligibility rules were tightened, and mandatory participation requirements were introduced (Winter). This policy has its basis in neoliberalism—a political-economic doctrine that facilitates free market reforms, such as active welfare, privatization, and deregulation. Neoliberalism also reorganizes the social domain, extending the rationality of the market to areas that are not exclusively or primarily economic (Lemke 197), with implications for those parenting alone. Despite the Australian Labour government’s reinstatement of income support payment, Parenting Payment Single (PPS), for parents of children aged eight to fourteen years old, problematic features of WTW policy remain in place for sole parents in receipt of government income support (Klapdor and Thomas), potentially undermining their wellbeing and financial security at a time of high living and housing costs.

Literature has explored risk and welfare in the lives of sole mothers, highlighting the importance of responsive social policy that considers the differing circumstances and life stages of sole mothers (for example, see Zagel and Hubgen). The work-care preferences and challenges of sole mothers have also been well-documented. This literature shows that, overall, sole mothers want to engage in paid work but also report prioritizing their care responsibilities towards their children (for example, see Grahame and Marston). However, it appears that research has yet to systematically explore policy opportunities from the perspectives of sole mothers themselves.

This article provides an overview of this literature before introducing the present study’s methodology and how it addresses this gap. Next, it analyzes the policy implications of sole mothers’ accounts of risk, welfare, paid work,

and caregiving that were published in response to Australian news stories on the Gillard government's sole parent welfare amendments. To conclude, this article reflects on the study's findings, arguing for policy measures and bolder advocacy efforts that centre the lived experiences of sole mothers, alongside greater political and social recognition of caregiving.

Sole Mothers' Life Course Trajectories: Risks, Diversity, and Policy Implications

Relationship separation, divorce, and parenthood are life course risks that are predominantly absorbed by women. Longitudinal research shows that when needs are controlled for, the transition to parenthood is as strongly linked to reduced family income (and associated risks) among sole parents as partner absence is, illustrating how motherhood earnings penalties in combination with the cost of partner absence affect sole mothers' economic wellbeing (Harkness, "The Accumulation" 1377). In Australia, sole parent families, four in five of which are headed by women, constitute the poorest household type, with one-third living at or below the poverty line (Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Labour Force Status"; Australian Council of Social Services, "Poverty in Australia"). The financial risks associated with sole motherhood in the absence of adequate employment, social protection and support not only affect mothers while they are raising families but can also consolidate and accumulate over time (Zagel and Hubgen 172). Older single women, many of whom are mothers, are at increased risk of housing precarity, including first-time homelessness, in resource-rich countries like Australia, Canada, and the United States, highlighting the impact of neoliberal policy and gendered (and devalued) caregiving in the life course (Hastings and Craig 356).

Relationship breakdown also carries physical and mental health and mortality risks for sole mothers, as well as material and social risks for their children (Benzeval; Burström et al.; Sabbath et al.; Zagel). These risks are in turn linked to unemployment and financial and work-family strain for sole mothers (Glennerster et al.; Nieuwenhuis et al.; Sabbath et al., "Use of Life Course"). Concerning mortality risks, nonworking sole mothers are at the highest risk of early mortality, followed by working sole mothers, nonworking married mothers, and married mothers who reenter the workforce following a period of leave after the birth of children (Sabbath et al., "Use of Life Course" 96). A similar pattern can be observed with morbidity and mental health risks (Glennerster et al.; Nieuwenhuis et al.; Wilkins et al.). Informal support and religious beliefs can mediate the mental health impacts of financial and work-family strain for some sole mothers (Mendenhall et al. 74); however, sole mothers may be at increased risk of social marginalization due to decreased time resources arising from their dual roles as mothers and workers. Such risks

are further increased for sole mothers who are single when they give birth, young mothers, and mothers with low educational attainment, even in countries with relatively generous and comprehensive welfare systems (Lorentzen and Syltevik).

The life course literature on sole mothers illuminates not only risks but also change, diversity, and policy opportunities. Hannah Zagel and Sabine Hubgen note that the increase in sole motherhood, though taking place at different rates across the world, is “one of the major demographic developments in societies today and poses new challenges for welfare states,” which are best addressed through a life course approach (171). Such an approach, they argue, should consider not only the growth of sole parent families but also the diversification of this family form, which reflects “varying degrees of socioemotional stress, care responsibilities and economic security” (171). In other words, sole mothers require support that is relevant to their specific life-course context and socioeconomic circumstances.

Lending support to this statement is a study of sole mothers in the United Kingdom (UK), which found that employment is not associated with a health benefit for sole mothers unless they have access to additional supportive policies (Harkness, “The Effect”). Supportive policies may include child support payments, policies that help sole mothers reconcile work and care, and adequate protection across the different life stages in which sole motherhood is experienced. Importantly, these policies should consider the work-care preferences of sole mothers and recognize the value of caregiving—topics discussed in the sections ahead.

The Impacts of WTW: Exacerbating Difficulties in the Life Course of Sole Mothers

Over the last several decades, a raft of government policies has been introduced across the Western world to enable women’s workforce participation (Alonso-Albarran et al.). While these policies have often been framed in terms of gender equality, the reality is that they align with neoliberalism—a broader policy agenda that emphasizes paid work participation (Wolfinger, *Welfare Debate* i). Although common-sensical on the surface, this policy agenda, typified by WTW, ignores labour market conditions and sole mothers’ differing circumstances and renders invisible their work in the home, with implications across the life course.

In Australia, WTW reforms were introduced in 2006 and 2012 under the Howard and Gillard governments, respectively. The 2006 reforms moved new recipients of PPS onto the lower-paying unemployment payment formerly known as Newstart Allowance (NSA) once their youngest child turned eight years of age (previously it was sixteen years) (Grahame and Marston). This

change was accompanied by mandatory participation requirements of fifteen hours of paid employment per week or work-focussed activities (Winter) and a significant lowering of the tapering rate, or “income free area,” which is the amount of money recipients can earn through work before their government payment is affected (Crawford). In 2013, under the Gillard government, grandfathered recipients of PPS were transitioned onto NSA (Wolfinger, *Welfare Debate*).

These reforms were not unique to Australia. WTW formed part of a new era in welfare policy that emerged across the Western industrialized world from the 1980s and 1990s (Wolfinger, “From Harlots” 56). During this period, the postwar view of welfare as an unconditional, though limited, social right was replaced by a view of welfare as creating various social ills (Dwyer; Shaver). As such, new rules were introduced, restricting income support through conditions of entitlement, mandatory participation requirements, surveillance, and punitive measures for noncompliant recipients (Winter; Yeatman).

Sole mothers were among the groups most impacted by these reforms. Previously, caregiving was seen as—albeit problematically—the appropriate role of women, and sole mothers were more or less supported by the state in exercising this role; however, by the early twenty-first century, that view had drastically changed (Blaxland, “Mothers and Mutual Obligation”; Crawford; Grahame and Marston). Under WTW, sole mothers were deemed workers first and caregivers second (Blaxland, “Mothers and Mutual Obligation”).

Following years of advocacy by sole mother groups, on September 20, 2023, the Australian coalition government passed legislation that allowed sole parent welfare recipients to remain on PPS until their youngest child turns fourteen years old, partly reversing the Howard and Gillard governments’ WTW reforms affecting sole parents (Albanese). The reinstatement of PPS for sole parents of children aged eight to fourteen years also followed the release of a report by Anne Summers (*The Choice*), which shows a clear link between sole motherhood, domestic abuse, and poverty. Critically, the report demonstrates that sole mother poverty was exacerbated by WTW reforms, which put women and their children at heightened risk of violence. These findings are echoed in the broader WTW literature. Overall, this literature demonstrates that the impacts of WTW have been generally negative for sole mother participants, resulting in poverty, precarious employment, housing insecurity, and poor mental and physical health outcomes among this group (Beer et al.; Bodsworth; Campbell et al.; Cook; Kiely and Butterworth; McArthur and Winkworth). However, some research shows that for employed sole mothers, WTW has—in European contexts at least—resulted in improved mental health, with high employment among sole mothers being correlated with generous activation policies and, importantly, childcare

services (Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado).

Despite the reinstatement of PPS for sole parents of children aged eight to fourteen years, certain problematic features of WTW policy remain, including rigid participation requirements and mandatory training for low-income jobs, while the NSA rate is “scandalously low” (Bodsworth; Summers 98). According to the WTW literature, mandatory participation requirements—which continue to apply to PPS recipients with a youngest child aged six or older (Klapdor and Thomas)—ignore persistent gendered patterns of work and care and structural impediments to paid work participation and sustainable employment, exacerbating financial and health difficulties among sole mothers (Bodsworth; Cook; McArthur and Winkworth). In this literature, mothers report a lack of recognition by staff of their identities as mothers and workers; a lack of understanding and compassion regarding the challenges of being a sole parent; and a one-size-fits-all approach to WTW where rigid rules are applied, limiting how they can combine paid work and parenting (Bodsworth; Grahame and Marston). In some instances, women were forced to leave behind children with significant health problems or leave children alone unsupervised so that they could meet compulsory work activities (Brady, “Gluing”; Casey). Alternatively, sole mothers were financially penalized when they could not meet these requirements or exited the income support system due to difficulties meeting activity requirements during school holidays (Casey; Blaxland, “Street-Level Interpellation”). Those who benefited from WTW tended to have higher control facilitated through enhanced skills or qualifications, increased confidence in their employability, ability to access employment that is compatible with caring responsibilities, and earnings sufficient to improve their standard of living (Campbell et al. 8).

Mothers’ Preferences for Care and Paid Work in the Life Course

The prioritization of paid work by WTW not only undermines mothers’ ability to care for themselves and their children in already challenging circumstances. It has consequences for the valuing of carework more broadly and directly contravenes the values that underpin this labour, resulting in internal conflict as much as literal conflict, as women attempt to navigate often incongruent priorities and expectations. In the WTW literature, mothers are keenly aware of this undervaluation but still believe that mothering is a worthwhile job and report prioritizing carework due to their children’s dependence on them (Brady, “Understanding”; Casey; Grahame and Marston; McArthur and Winkworth; McCormack).

This prioritization is central to the work decisions many sole mothers make, even though paid work also forms an important part of their identities (Grahame and Marston; Brady, “Understanding”). For example, young sole

mother participants in a study by Morag McArthur and Gail Winkworth wanted to engage in study and paid work to model a work ethic to their children, although these accounts also reflect a neoliberal understanding of productivity and so-called good mothering. However, some employed women in research by Michelle Brady and colleagues said that they would rather be full-time mothers, adding that they only work because they must provide for their children or because paid work is now more valued by society (Brady, “Understanding”). In other research, sole mothers preferred part-time work, especially when children are young and paid work within school hours (Bodsworth; Charlesworth et al.; Grahame and Marston; van Egmond et al.)—preferences that appear to be reflected in the high rates of part-time work among couples mothers (Productivity Commission) but are nevertheless disregarded by WTW’s “work-first and gender-neutral” approach to participation (Brady and Cook 1; Cook 514).

Unsurprisingly, women with multiple children and no informal childcare support were most concerned about mandatory participation requirements (Brady, “Understanding”). Again, these concerns were for their children. All the sole mother participants in Brady’s study supported the notion that parents on income support should be encouraged to take up employment; however, they were worried that these requirements would limit their ability to supervise and support their children during difficult periods (Brady, “Understanding”).

Overall, the literature suggests that sole mothers experience financial, health, and mortality risks across the life course. They also experience differing levels of risk based on socioeconomic and demographic variables. These factors continue to be overlooked by Australian welfare policy, despite the reinstatement of PPS for sole parents of children aged eight to fourteen. While there is also ample literature that reports on the work and care preferences of sole mothers on welfare, there appear to be no studies that systematically examine the policy implications of sole mothers’ experiences of risk, welfare, paid work, and caregiving. The present study seeks to address these gaps, drawing on online news comments posted by self-identifying sole mothers during a period of intense welfare debate. The next section outlines this study’s methodology.

Methodology

This article draws on data from a broader study on online perceptions of sole mother poverty and welfare, namely online responses to Australian news stories published on the Gillard government’s sole parent welfare amendments.² It focusses on the accounts of self-identifying sole mothers who posted anonymously³ on popular news websites between May 2012 and March 2014. Sole mother commenters sometimes divulged their sole mother status in

these accounts or their sole parent status and gender identity via the inclusion of a female first name.

News websites provide access to (often) anonymous and unfiltered public discourse on a wide range of topics, presenting new opportunities for social research, as well as some challenges. For example, some of the online news comments featured in this study provide limited insights into the views and experiences of commenters because they are comprised of a few words. Moreover, the broader study on online perceptions analyzes more than one thousand comments, yet fewer than one hundred of them were posted by commenters who identified as sole mothers. This finding could in part reflect the online activity of sole mothers. According to Jerry Watkins, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely than those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds to interact with online (and offline) political content. Nevertheless, the comments of self-identifying sole mothers who shared stories of financial struggle are the focus of this article.

To analyze online news comments, this study used thematic analysis. In line with this method for qualitative data analysis, the comments of self-identifying sole mothers were analyzed and coded for themes and patterns in the data. A total of twenty-eight comments, retrieved from the comment sections of online news articles, were coded and analyzed, given that the sole mother authors of these comments shared personal accounts of, or reflections on, hardship, mothering, employment, and welfare.

Feminist and Foucauldian perspectives informed this research design. Together, these perspectives provide the analytical tools for sole mother voices to be heard through emphasis on women's perspectives, alternative discourses, social construction, and the agency of oppressed groups. To capture the policy implications of the mothers' accounts, two of Carol Bacchi's six "what's the problem represented to be?" (WPR) questions were used to interrogate the comments of sole mothers who posted on media websites. Specifically, questions one and six of this approach for policy analysis were applied. These questions ask about problem representations and how/where they have been produced, disseminated, and defended. Relevant scholarly research was used to inform the analysis using question six. The findings are discussed ahead.

Findings

Among the comments posted by sole mothers are personal accounts of hardship, domestic violence, mothering, employment, and social exclusion. These comments reveal six key policy implications related to employment, formal childcare, government income support, housing, child support, and caregiving. Each theme is discussed in turn below.

Access to Sustainable Employment and Formal Childcare

Sole mother commenters often posted about issues of job shortages and low-paid and insecure work concerning the welfare amendments. These issues often involved difficulties with accessing formal childcare or with managing caregiving responsibilities, resulting in strain and insecurity in the lives of commenters. These comments point to socioeconomic and structural factors that result in disadvantage for sole mothers in the context of inadequate income support, highlighting the need for initiatives that support sole mothers' training and education for sustainable employment, and greater investment in formal childcare.

In the following comment, a sole mother who is a homeowner communicates her fears about how the welfare amendments, combined with precarious employment and caregiving responsibilities, will affect her housing situation:

Employers won't employ me full time because of the shifts. I cannot work weekends or nights. I saved for years, determined to buy a house, as I am so sick of moving and struggling to find cheaper accommodation.... U [sic] can't just go and share with anyone so [you] often have to pay a major expense in accommodation. I am now paying the same if not slightly less for a house [that] is my own. I lost the rent assistance and now will lose another \$60 a week. I did not budget for that. I will have \$70 a week to live on when I put money aside for rates, insurance. I am trying my best for my daughter so she can have a home. I cried at work today because i [sic] got six hrs [of] work this week.

The situation of this commenter is precarious. She lives hand to mouth some weeks when her hours of work are low but cannot work weekends due to her caregiving responsibilities. This comment highlights how low-paid welfare, insecure work, and caregiving responsibilities intersect to create financial and housing insecurity despite sole mothers' best efforts to create security for themselves and their children.

In the comment below, a single mother shares her distress over the financial toll of the welfare amendments amid ongoing difficulties accessing paid childcare: "We have 700 kids in our school and I was entitled to no after school care as it [was] booked out.... I tried again the following [term] and cried so now I get two times per week (of paid childcare), reduced rate [of NSA] or not.... I work casual so don't work the same days each week so can't take the shifts." In applying Bacchi's first question about problem representations, it is evident that this comment also highlights the impact of low-paid welfare in situations of underemployment and casual work, as well as the limitations of formal childcare for those who have rotating rosters—a situation noted in the literature. According to Brady, the Australian system of

formal care is inflexible and not compatible with nonstandard work schedules (“Gluings” 826). Childcare centres generally operate from 7:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. (or 7:00 to 9:00 a.m. and 3:00 to 6:00 p.m. in the case of before and after school care) and do not allow families to alter their bookings from week to week, which can present problems for sole parents who require nonstandard hours of childcare and who may have rotating rosters (“Gluings” 826). As such, women like the above commenter are at risk of reduced hours and pay as well as job loss where they do not have informal supports readily available. This situation is further exacerbated by the requirement that participants engage in at least fifteen hours of paid work or approved activities per week.

Since the publication of the above comment, the Australian government has introduced the revised In Home Care (IHC) program, which is an approved childcare service type designed for families who cannot access other types of approved childcare (Australian Institute of Family Studies and Social Policy Research Centre). However, families must demonstrate that they are unable to access mainstream forms of approved childcare; moreover, the program only offers 3,200 places countrywide, and parents may have to recruit an educator themselves, given a lack of qualified educators who are available to provide IHC (Australian Institute of Family Studies and Social Policy Research Centre). Moreover, families must be aware that the program exists to access its benefits.

In another comment, a sole mother writes about the impact of deteriorating workplace conditions on her financial situation and ability to juggle paid work with caregiving, a situation which she explains is compounded by WTW’s compliance measures:

I have never been in this position and have worked for 29 years. THE WORKFORCE IS NOW CASUALISED.... I buy everything 2nd [sic] hand accept underwear. My work is casual, on a phone call or text basis – sometimes on an hour’s notice ... no rosters at all. It may be 13, 15 or 25 [hours of work per week]. The pressure from Centrelink is relentless as they do not pro rata the weeks that you do more than 15 hours per week. I work weekends to keep the hours up, but then need childcare for the weekend and also don’t see my child. After school care is fully booked, I am entitled to 2 nights per week... I am happy to work 30 hours per week, 9-5.30 (school drop off is 8.45). The jobs are not there—everything is casual or at night.

The sole mother author of this comment has little control over when she works due to the casual nature of her job, while she, too, reports that childcare availability is limited. She experiences great difficulty in meeting mandatory participation requirements of fifteen hours a week on account of her situation and must sometimes work weekends to make up the hours, limiting the time she can spend with her child. Her experiences reflect reports in the literature

regarding the impacts of rigid participation requirements in the lives of sole mothers (Bodsworth; Grahame and Marston).

Other mothers engaged in low-paid work wrote about the impact of WTW on their finances, with one sole mother commenting that she now has less disposable income than when she received the full NSA: “While my son was young and I started working again, I actually made less once you factored in childcare, petrol, etc because they penalize you at such a low level of earnings.”

The sole mother author of this comment highlights the socioeconomic and gendered barriers to financial security in the context of WTW, whereby sole mothers experience a significant lowering of the tapering rate, or “income free area” of their employment earnings, when they are transferred from PPS to NSA. Sole mothers engaged in low-paid employment, therefore, experience a “double whammy” of penalties once they are moved onto NSA—that is, their income is reduced due to being moved to a lower-paying income support payment, as well as due to the lower tapering rate of this payment.

By way of contrast, the following comment by a sole mother highlights the importance of a flexible, well-paid job in ensuring financial security and wellbeing:

I am fortunate to have a well paying job that was flexible and I could pick the days I wanted to work (work 3 days) and can increase those when my DS [Dear Son] starts school, but for my self worth, to set an example for my son and to give me the adult time I was craving, as well as needing to financially as my ex was never on time with child support, then it has been the best thing for myself and my child.

The benefits of paid work, highlighted in this comment, are also noted in the academic literature where sole mothers have described the benefits of participating in employment, which include increased self-esteem and confidence (Harkness, “The Effect”; Hubgen; Kowalewska; McArthur et al.; Saugeres and Hulse). Paid work has also been argued to have positive effects on the children of sole mothers (Saugeres and Hulse). However, as seen in the comments, the benefits of employment are diminished for sole mothers engaged in low-paid and precarious labour, highlighting the importance of adequate income support, childcare, study, and training as mothers look to improve their family’s situation.

Greater Recognition of Caregiving

While employment and childcare form key themes in sole mothers’ accounts of hardship, many of these accounts also highlight the incompatibility of paid work with primary caregiving, especially in instances of casual and shift work where the nature of the work makes it difficult to arrange childcare. The following comment, in which a sole mother shares her distress at having to

work more hours than she sees her child, especially illuminates this tension and the need for greater policy recognition of carework:

I am a single mother on the pension, I get belittled for it all the time. I left an abusive, mentally unwell man to give my child a better life. I will work more than I will see my child. I don't want to be on benefits my whole life. I want to work and better our lives, but I need a job that isn't going to keep me away from my child and put her in more outside [c]are than the time she'd have with me. I want to parent my child not pay others to do it for me so I can work for a minimal [sic] wage.

This sole mother's experience points to the unsuitability of the work-first model of WTW for those with primary caregiving responsibility, especially in situations of vulnerability. Applying Bacchi's sixth question about where a particular problematization has been represented or defended, past research has demonstrated that this model is harmful to the wellbeing of sole mothers (and their children) and is at odds with their ethic of care, as shared by the commenter (Grahame and Marston). Sole mothers tend to prioritize their responsibilities as mothers ahead of their responsibilities as workers, even though they also want to work (Grahame and Marston). Although WTW technically facilitates sole parents' part-time employment by requiring principal carers in receipt of NSA to undertake thirty hours of mutual obligation activities per fortnight, the reality is that sole parents on this payment are likely to struggle financially on part-time earnings. Consequently, sole mothers are forced to make difficult decisions about paid work and care, as demonstrated by the previous commenter who has been compelled to work long hours.

Access to Adequate Government Income Support and Affordable Housing

Sole mothers also detailed circumstances in which they cannot work due to an absence of informal support, for example, when children are sick or in the evening when children are home from school. This reality suggests that the higher-paying PPS acts as a buffer for sole mothers, especially those in low-paid and casual work:

I don't have anyone to look after my child if he is unwell. When I am sick, I have to get my child to school and parent.... There are school holidays to consider, Christmas holidays, the dentist, the doctors, specialists (especially if your child has special needs), paying bills and doing the groceries. What happens if mum can't take care of herself, who is going to care for her kids?

I need a job that allows me to work around the school holidays because I have no family to mind my children and there's no way I'm leaving primary aged children home alone.

And if you have no-one to step in and help out if the children (or you) become sick, it is unbelievably stressful trying to keep a job.

Bacchian analysis of these comments shows the inadequacy of formal childcare in certain situations, as well as points to the importance of welfare as a safety net in the lives of sole mothers and their children, particularly in situations of precarious work. As implied by the above comments, and discussed in the literature review, WTW compels women without adequate support to make difficult decisions regarding the welfare of their children, highlighting the program's unsuitability for those parenting alone (Brady, "Gluings"; Casey).

In the following comment, a sole mother writes about her fear of homelessness now that she is on the NSA, has had her work hours cut, and faces redundancy. Her words highlight the critical importance of welfare as a safety net for those raising children alone or with limited financial and practical support from the other parent:

And now my son & I are facing losing our home, because not only did I lose parenting payment in Jan 2012, but my work hours were cut because the business suffered a downturn in work because of the hardening economic times that our politicians are claiming is NOT happening. In the last year alone, I lost combined \$360 per week in income & have been desperately searching for a new job for the past 14 months but it seems that even with 12+ years' experience & qualifications I am not employable once they find out I am a sole parent.... I refuse to work evenings or nights & leave him [her child] on his own as I believe that is completely irresponsible. I have been given notice that in 6 months I'll have no job at all as the business I work for will be closing its doors. After that happens, I'm terrified of what will happen... no job... we'll lose our home & end up homeless.

This comment highlights not only the financial impacts but also the mental health impacts of inadequate welfare in difficult circumstances. In the case of this mother, the prospect of redundancy, a sluggish economic market, a reduction in income support, caregiving responsibilities, and employment discrimination work to undermine her housing security and wellbeing. She is terrified of the prospect of homelessness—a reality she is likely to face despite her qualifications, years of work experience, and attempts to find another job.

Another sole mother writes about the impact of housing unaffordability on the financial wellbeing of sole mother families in the context of low-paid welfare and expensive vocational education: "Housing affordability is critical with only 1% on [the unemployment payment] Newstart affording the median rental market. Tafe⁵ fees now doubled so the two things to lift one from [p]overty has [sic] now been removed." The former commenter is not alone in her housing struggles. Applying Bacchi's sixth WPR question shows that WTW

greatly reduces sole mothers' access to affordable housing, according to research by Anglicare Australia ("Rental Affordability Snapshot" 2015). Several years following the implementation of the Gillard government's welfare amendments, Anglicare Australia reported that only 0.01 per cent of the metropolitan rental market is accessible to sole parents on NSA, compared to 0.05 per cent and 5.28 per cent of this market where parents are on PPS and in low-income employment, respectively ("Rental Affordability Snapshot" 2017). The housing situation of mothers on either the NSA or PPS is especially dire post-COVID-19, as both housing and living costs have greatly increased, highlighting not only the role of welfare as a safety net for vulnerable groups but also the urgent need for affordable housing (Azize). While the Australian government recently announced plans to expand its Help to Buy scheme to allow more people to purchase a home with the federal government, sole mothers who are unemployed or in low-paid and casual work are not eligible for the scheme and remain vulnerable to housing insecurity (Cooper).

A Robust Child Support System

In addition to employment issues, formal and informal childcare, and low-paid welfare, sole mothers (and their adult children)⁴ wrote about the impact of economic abandonment and financial abuse on their lives and the lives of their children, pointing to the need for a robust child support system. For example, one sole mother wrote that "often ex's [sic] find ways of avoiding correct family payments.... I was a single parent from when my children were aged 5 and always had to work. I received \$40 of maintenance in the years of raising them till aged 14." The impacts of economic abandonment mentioned by this sole mother include long work hours. In the absence of adequately paid employment, sole mothers and their children may also experience deprivation, particularly in a context of welfare conditionality. According to a study by Christine Skinner et al., which is based on population survey data in Australia and the UK, the payment of child support provides significant relief from poverty, especially in Australia, where payments reduce sole mothers' poverty rate by 21 per cent. Despite the poverty reduction potential of child support, child support payers too often fail to pay child support in full and on time. Around the time the Gillard government's sole parent welfare amendments were implemented, nearly one-quarter of payer parents owed child support (Fehlberg et al.), contributing to over 1.25 billion dollars of child support debt (Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee).

Another sole mother wrote about the effects of financial abuse and discrimination following an extremely violent relationship. She suggested that the welfare policy and discourse unfairly target sole mothers despite the neglect and abuse of some fathers:

It's not always the woman's "fault" when she has a child. I was married

but had to leave my husband after he permanently injured one son by violently shaking him and tried to kill the other. However, I was treated like excreta after that by many people, because I was a renting, bike-riding, single mother with three kids, (and scarcely received any child support from him—he even tried to steal the children’s beds) while he was well respected because he could continue his career and afford a house and car.

Applying Bacchi’s sixth question here highlights that the commenter is not alone in her experience of financial abuse postseparation. In their study on child support and financial abuse, Kay Cook et al. highlight the insidious ways in which the Australian Child Support Scheme is used by abusive payer parents to jeopardize the financial safety of recipient parents, mostly women, and their children (14). An alarming 80 per cent of women participants in this study reported that their ex-partner had replaced physical abuse with financial abuse via child support, for example through the deliberate minimization of child support liabilities (Cook et al. 23). This abuse has significant financial, physical, emotional, and mental health impacts on recipient parents, often long after they have separated from former partners (Cook et al. 19).

Conclusion

This article has examined self-identifying sole mothers’ accounts of hardship, mothering, paid work, and welfare during a period of welfare reform to highlight policy opportunities for addressing financial and work-family strain in the lives of sole mothers. These accounts highlight situations of insecure work and housing insecurity, difficulties accessing formal and informal childcare, the incompatibility of insecure work and long employment hours with caregiving, the importance of government income support as a safety net, and the underpayment and nonpayment of child support. Such comments further demonstrate how WTW’s gender-neutral approach to participation has been harmful to mothers and children, especially those engaged in precarious, low-paid employment and recovering from abuse and poor health.

Considering these findings, addressing poverty and precarity among sole mothers requires more than just expanding access to low-paid welfare payments. It involves centring the lived experiences of sole mothers in research, advocacy, and policymaking efforts to tackle barriers to financial security and wellbeing. As part of tackling barriers to employment and childcare, Australia’s IHC program could be expanded and advertised to sole parents on WTW.⁶ Additionally, WTW legislation could be amended to allow parents on NSA to pro rata the hours worked over a financial year to meet mandatory participation requirements of fifteen hours a week. This measure would more readily allow parents in casual work to meet compliance measures, especially

if facing added challenges related to poor health and domestic violence. The Australian government could also consider bringing the NSA payment rate and amount that can be earned before reductions commence in line with PPS for sole parent recipients engaged in higher or vocational education, in recognition that studying for improved employment outcomes and long-term financial security is challenging for sole parents in receipt of NSA. Finally, in line with research by Cook et al., *Safety by Design*⁷ should be at the heart of the child support, welfare, and tax systems to protect women at risk of post-separation financial abuse (32).⁸

Critically, solutions must involve comprehensive support for all caregivers in recognition of the vital social importance of this work, as well as the gender inequities arising from parenthood and divorce, which often follow sole mothers into older age. Efforts to prioritize caregiving must begin with challenging the neoliberal rhetoric of the last several decades, which has devalued and depoliticized caregiving. Caregiving is not only real work; it is gendered and essential labour that underpins paid work and sustains life itself. Strategies for revaluing and prioritizing caregiving in policy could include a national strategy that seeks to provide a coordinated, strategic framework for increasing recognition and support of this vital work. Such a strategy could not only lead to the formulation of policies that uplift and support caregiving but also alleviate the current care crisis, reduce the stigma associated with welfare receipt, and take back family and community life in an era of overwork, mental health crisis, and endemic loneliness.

Endnotes

1. Since writing the first draft of this article, new Australian national data have revealed that the rate of divorce in Australia is at the lowest level since the introduction of no-fault divorce in 1976 (Qu et al.). Findings from research by Whelan and Hardigan, presented at the Australian Conference of Economists in July 2025, and not yet peer reviewed, reveal that the high cost of housing in Australia may be keeping people locked in unhappy or otherwise untenable marriages, with implications for women's and children's safety.
2. This study has been approved by the Southern Cross University Human Research Ethics Committee. The approval number is ECN-16-312.
3. Online news comments were chosen for analysis in this research as they provide a less ethically contentious source of data than, for example, Facebook comments; they also provide a rich source of information for qualitative analysis. Unlike Facebook users, online news commenters are frequently anonymous. These commenters typically post under a first name or pseudonym and their comments are not linked to a profile picture

or page. Thus, they are not identifiable, and the use of their data for research purposes does not pose any privacy concerns.

4. While the focus of the present study is on the accounts of self-identifying mothers who commented on news websites, it is important to note that multiple adult children of sole mothers commented, too. In all these comments, adult children recounted the financial abuse they and their mothers endured and the impact of this abuse on their lives.
5. TAFE, which stands for Technical and Further Education, is a vocational education system in Australia.
6. In view of recent revelations regarding serious issues with the Australian Early Childhood Education and Care Sector, which include instances of sexual and physical abuse, poor supervision, declining educator standards and regulatory failures (Ferguson et al.; Ferguson and Gillett), any expansion of the IHC program must be done with child safety in mind.
7. According to the eSafety Commissioner, “Safety by Design puts user safety and rights at the centre of the design and development of online products and services.”
8. On June 3, 2025, the Commonwealth Ombudsman released a report on how Services Australia—an executive agency of the Australian Government responsible for delivering a range of welfare payments, health insurance payments, child support payments and other support services to eligible Australian citizens and permanent residents—is responding to financial abuse through the Child Support program. This report makes multiple recommendations for reform to address financial abuse through Child Support. However, at the time of writing this article, it remains to be seen how the Department of Social Services and Services Australia respond to these recommendations.

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Mothering Under Lock and Key: Pregnancy, Parenting, and the Punitive Realities of Incarcerated Women

Since the 1980s, the number of women incarcerated in the United States has risen by over 645 per cent (Bronson and Sufrin; Kajstura and Sawyer). Nevertheless, the criminal justice system continues to operate with male-centred policies that disregard women's unique experiences. This article examines the intersection of incarceration with motherhood, pregnancy, punishment, and parenting, highlighting how systemic neglect exacerbates the struggles of justice-involved women. Most incarcerated women are young, poor women of colour with histories of mental health issues, substance use, and victimization. Among these women, a significant majority are mothers whose imprisonment leads to family disruption, poverty, and weakened parental bonds. Pregnant incarcerated women face further hardships, including limited access to prenatal care and the harmful and controversial practice of shackling during pregnancy and labour. Despite state-level restrictions, shackling persists, exposing women to severe physical and psychological harm. Postrelease, mothers encounter additional barriers, such as financial instability, stigma, challenges in regaining custody of their children, and insufficient access to community resources like childcare and employment support. These obstacles complicate successful reentry and often perpetuate cycles of poverty and criminalization. Current policies and practices largely ignore the gendered realities of incarcerated women, reinforcing historical biases and systemic inequalities. Drawing on feminist criminology, public health research, and legal scholarship, this article argues for comprehensive, gender-responsive reforms that prioritize the health, dignity, and familial bonds of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated mothers. Without meaningful change, the carceral system will continue to marginalize one of its most vulnerable and overlooked populations.

Introduction

Since the 1980s, the population of women incarcerated in prisons and jails in the United States (US) has multiplied by over 645 per cent (Bronson and Sufirin; Kajstura and Sawyer), a rate far surpassing that of men entering the criminal justice system (Ricker). Overall, the women entering US prisons and jails today are overwhelmingly from Black and Latino communities suffering from poverty and limited available resources. Furthermore, the majority of incarcerated women are serving time for nonviolent crimes such as property and drug offences (Arditti and Few, “Mothers’ Reentry”; Braithewaite et al.; Budd; Ricker). Thanks to Reagan’s strict legislation during the War on Drugs and the application of three-strikes laws, nonviolent drug offences and property crimes are the primary contributors to women being placed behind bars. Although the rate of women entering prison has consistently far outpaced the rate of men for the past several years, much of today’s criminological literature prioritizes research on men (Budd). The preference for exploring men’s pathways and experiences in America’s criminal justice system contributes to challenges for incarcerated women, who are often overlooked and disregarded.

Female prisons are notoriously provided with few opportunities for institutional programming or therapeutic resources. Additionally, stakeholders are more interested in treating and rehabilitating men than women, resulting in underfunding for women’s institutions. This has contributed to an overarching theme in the US justice system: Justice-involved women are an “ignored population” (Braithewaite et al.). Such a situation is unfortunate, yet not surprising, considering that prisons are a construct created by and for men, with little regard for gender-responsive care and treatment that should be provided to women behind bars.

The existing research on gendered experiences in carceral spaces demonstrates that women face different histories and outcomes associated with entering and exiting the prison system than men, yet are provided the same (if not less) treatment as men. Mothers especially suffer harsh treatment due to their supposed betrayal of stereotypical maternal roles, as they seemingly act in their best interest and display behaviour of a “bad mother” due to their criminal involvement. The following article reviews the state of imprisonment and punishment for incarcerated mothers, examining how mothers behind bars are subjected to harsh treatment, such as shackling and receiving limited support for family reunification and visitation. However, punishment for mothers does not end after release. The following section details how inadequate preparation for release and exaggerated expectations associated with community corrections can continue to disrupt mothers’ abilities to reintegrate into their children’s lives. The article concludes with policy and

research recommendations to address the multitude of challenges justice-involved mothers face.

Literature Review

Women Behind Bars

Women in the criminal justice system are disproportionately young, poor, uneducated, Black, and from disadvantaged communities (Arditti and Few, “Mothers’ Reentry”). Additionally, current research has found overwhelming similarities in women’s pathways to prison, citing a repeated theme deemed the “triple threat” (Arditti and Few, “Mothers’ Reentry”; “Maternal Distress”). The triple threat consists of the three conditions that a vast majority of justice-involved women have experienced before incarceration: mental health issues, substance use, and abuse/victimization (Arditti and Few, “Mothers’ Reentry”). The prevalence of the triple threat in US prisons highlights a uniquely female phenomenon. Studies examining aspects of the triple threat have found women in prison and jail consistently report higher instances of mental health diagnoses (ranging from 66 to 73 per cent) compared to incarcerated men (ranging from 35 to 55 per cent) (Arditti and Few, “Maternal Distress”; Bronson and Berzofsky). Furthermore, incarcerated women are more likely to meet standards for serious psychological distress (20 per cent of women in prison and 32 per cent of women in jail) compared to men in prison (14 per cent) and jail (26 per cent) (Bronson and Berzofsky). Posttraumatic stress disorder, major depressive disorder, and bipolar disorders are among the most common mental illnesses present in the incarcerated female population (Hidayati et al.). In addition to psychological struggles, most incarcerated women (58 per cent) have admitted to dependence or addiction to drugs and other substances before their imprisonment, a significantly larger percentage compared to men (Kajstura and Sawyer). Many researchers contend that the high rates of substance abuse and mental illness coincide with an alarming rate of victimization among justice-involved women (DeHart). Joi Anderson and colleagues estimate that around 60 per cent of incarcerated women have experienced victimization in the form of intimate partner violence (IPV), sexual violence, or abuse during childhood. Mia Karlsson and Melissa Zielinski found that 82 per cent of their sample of sixty incarcerated women had experienced sexual victimization before serving time.

Despite the data examining women’s experiences in prison highlighting the overwhelming similarities between their struggles with mental health, substance use, and victimization, policymakers are more interested in funding for research, policies, and programs prioritized to benefit men’s facilities, as men make up most of the incarcerated population in the US. This context is unfortunate, considering that evidence supports that women experience prison

and jail in unique ways, yet the carceral system seems to be tailored specifically to men. One criminologist went so far as to say that little or no thought “was given to the possibility of a female prisoner until she appeared at the door of the institution. It was as though crime and punishment existed in a world in which gender equaled male” (Mauer and Chesney-Lind 79). Among the limited research that has investigated women’s experiences in the criminal justice system, scholars have determined that the majority of them are mothers and that mothers experience unique challenges compared to nonmothers, including harrowing experiences of punishment linked to their pregnancies, limited access to reproductive care or their children, diminishing parental bonds associated with incarceration, and psychological consequences of separation and imprisonment.

Mothers Behind Bars

A growing genre of research has begun to explore the unique challenges that justice-involved mothers face while inside prison. The majority of the female prison and jail inmate population are mothers, with 80 per cent of women in jail and 58 per cent of women in prison being parents (Sawyer and Bertram). By sentencing mothers to prison time, thousands of family dynamics are disrupted. A report from the Prison Policy Initiative determined that more than 1.3 million mothers had been separated from their underage children because of their incarceration by 2010, with numbers growing since then (Sawyer and Bertram). Incarcerating mothers consequently deprives households of the usual sole caregiver and source of income, endangering families by forcing them into poverty and foster care (Cooper-Sadlo et al.). Indeed, only 5 per cent of children of incarcerated mothers will remain in their households, and only 9 per cent will be with their fathers (Baldwin, “Tainted Love”). Unlike women without children, mothers suffer extreme emotional and mental stressors associated with separation from their children.

For mothers who look forward to opportunities to reunite with their children while inside, multiple factors dissuade visitation and limit access. For instance, women’s prison facilities are often in rural, isolated areas, making long-distance travel essential for some visitors. Families’ average distance to state prisons is about one hundred miles, while federal penitentiaries are even further, averaging a 250-mile trip (Clark and Duwe). Indeed, visitation research has found that incarcerated men are more likely to receive visits from their children than incarcerated mothers (Bloom). Further evidence was found in Joyce Arditti and April Few’s study (“Mothers’ Reentry”), which found that only half of their sample of justice-involved mothers received visits while incarcerated, with most only receiving one visit during their entire stay. Much of this is furthered by the fact that most justice-involved women do not have the economic means to afford regular visits from their loved ones. The financial

toll of finding transportation to faraway prison facilities while sacrificing time from work and family can inflict significant financial burdens on many visitors.

Furthermore, the traumatic separation between mothers behind bars and their children consequently promotes negative emotions, such as despair, hopelessness, grief, and shame from both parties (Baldwin, “Motherhood”). These intense emotions can increase the severity of women’s mental health and substance use problems as well as diminish parental bonds between mothers and their children. Weakened relationships between incarcerated mothers and their children can precede struggles associated with family reunification after release, making reentry challenging. Mothers behind bars experience familial disruption in addition to the strengthening of preexisting conditions, such as mental health issues, while in prison.

Sexual Reproductive Health, Pregnancy, and Shackling

To date, little research has examined pregnancy during incarceration, including the prevalence of pregnant women inside prisons and jails, access to sexual reproductive health services (SRH), family planning programming, or overall treatment while serving their sentence. This is surprising, considering that most women in prison and jail are typically between the ages of eighteen and forty-four (Carson and Anderson) and are still considered to be in their prime childbearing age and vulnerable to pregnancy. Currently, there are no federal reports providing data about pregnant women in confinement (Women and Justice Project). Findings from limited studies suggest that about three to four percent of incarcerated women, about fifty-eight thousand, enter prisons and jails while pregnant every year (Wang; Women and Justice Project). This number does not account for potential instances where women discover they are pregnant after entering the carceral system, either through natural or coercive means.

Despite the lack of available information on pregnant prisoners, a growing body of literature is examining their experiences and treatment before, during, and after pregnancy. Evidence suggests that pregnant inmates are often susceptible to harsh treatment by correctional staff, such as neglecting women’s medical needs and ignoring cries for help (Kuhlik). However, these findings do not account for the many women who may become pregnant while incarcerated. For instance, women may engage in sexual activity during conjugal visits and temporary releases or become pregnant through coercive sexual relationships with correctional staff.

Pregnant incarcerated women are especially vulnerable in terms of reproductive health. The lack of funding and attention to women’s institutions limits their access to essential prenatal care, such as vitamins, doctor visits, and prenatal testing (Gulaid and McCoy; Kuhlik). This situation is unfortunate considering that the majority of incarcerated women have histories of multiple

physical and psychological health problems, making them significantly more likely to experience complications with their pregnancy or birth, such as ectopic pregnancies, miscarriages, stillbirths, and even death (Bronson and Sufrin; Cavanagh et al.). Despite this, pregnant women often suffer harsher punishment by correctional staff than other women. Multiple studies have found that incarcerated pregnant women have experienced various forms of cruel and unusual punishment, such as correctional staff withholding medical care, ignoring cries for medical assistance, and forcing women to give birth alone in their cells, risking the lives of the mother and child (Kuhlik). These are all grounds for Eighth Amendment violations, yet they continue to persist.

Shackling, a practice deemed inhumane by numerous international organizations, is among the most notable treatments pregnant prisoners experience in American prisons and jails (ACOG; AMA; APA; AWHONN). Shackling is the practice of applying iron chain restraints on incarcerated women at any point during pregnancy, including during medical appointments, while giving birth, or during postpartum recovery. It can be applied in various combinations, such as around the ankles and abdomen, with handcuffs in front of or behind one's back, or to connect incarcerated women to restrict and control their movements (Martin; Sufrin).

Although restraining incarcerated individuals, both male and female, is a regular practice used for multiple occasions—such as transporting inmates to court, medical appointments, and to different areas of prisons and jails—the practice is widely condemned as unnecessary and dehumanizing when applied to pregnant prisoners. Shackling is primarily used to prevent incarcerated people from escaping custody and as a public safety precaution, yet there is little evidence to suggest that pregnant inmates are likely to exhibit violent behaviour or attempt to flee (Clarke and Simon; Martin), and most incarcerated women are serving sentences for nonviolent crimes (Arditti and Few, “Mothers’ Reentry”; Ricker). Furthermore, incarcerated pregnant women, due to their condition, are already restricted in their mobility and endurance. These factors contribute to the reality that pregnant women are especially less likely to attempt to escape, nor do they pose a threat to correctional staff or public safety. These considerations make it difficult to understand why shackling is used on pregnant inmates at all. Although research suggests that shackling during pregnancy can carry serious psychological and physical health implications for the mother and the fetus, the practice is still allowed in prisons and jails today. However, there is limited information available about the extent of shackling in American prisons and jails, creating an incomplete picture of when, how, and why it is used.

Some work has examined the underlying theoretical explanations for the practice. For instance, feminist criminologists Megan Martin and Priscilla Ocen have proposed that historical racial and gender stereotypes associated

with criminal women influence the practice. Specifically, there is a stigma that women who commit crimes are less feminine and more culpable for their behaviour. This belief, in combination with the fact that the majority of incarcerated women are people of colour, primarily Black and Latino, demonstrates a perpetuation of racist and sexist ideology (Ocen). Furthermore, the villainous and hypersexual portrayal of women in confinement garners much less sympathy, especially when they are pregnant (Martin; Ocen). Instead, their criminality conveys that these are bad mothers who deserve punishment for endangering their children and acting selfishly. Through a retributivist lens, these so-called bad mothers need to be restrained, since they abandoned their maternal instincts and are therefore more culpable for their crimes.

Although common criminological theories can theoretically explain correctional facilities' justification for the practice, it seems that the harms associated with shackling far outweigh the benefits. Medical professionals from various disciplines have identified numerous health risks associated with shackling during pregnancy. For example, during pregnancy, women often suffer from imbalances in weight distribution, increasing the probability of falling. The iron chains applied while shackled can cause further imbalances and immobility, causing women to stumble without the ability to right themselves or prevent contact with the ground. The results of which could include significant physical consequences, such as placental abruption, maternal haemorrhage, and stillbirth (Brawley and Kurnat-Thoma; Ferszt et al.). The restraints limiting women's mobility can also interfere with pregnancy diagnoses and interventions that could be life-threatening to the mother and the fetus, including delays in caesarean sections or a thromboembolic event (Brawley and Kurnat-Thoma; Cardaci; Ferszt et al.).

In addition to physical health risks, shackling poses numerous psychological issues that can persist long after mothers have given birth. In general, justice-involved women are more likely to have extensive histories of sexual abuse, trauma, and mental health problems (Arditti and Few, "Mothers' Reentry"; "Maternal Distress"). Shackling can intensify the psychological distress that incarcerated women likely already suffer from, increasing their vulnerability to diagnoses like depression, anxiety, and PTSD (Brawley and Kurnat-Thoma; Goshin et al.). It is unsurprising, then, that mothers who were shackled while pregnant, during labour, or afterwards have difficulty bonding with their infants, citing struggles with postpartum depression, breastfeeding, and inability to safely handle their child (Brawley and Kurnat-Thoma; Ferszt et al.). These challenges can ultimately cause problems with the child's development and pose future risks to their health. The physical and psychological trauma associated with shackling during and after pregnancy imposes serious health risks for mothers and their children that could extend far into their

lifetime. It is for these reasons that multiple organizations—including the American Medical Association (AMA), the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG), the Association of Women’s Health, Obstetric, and Neonatal Nurses (AWHONN), and the American Psychological Association (APA)—have denounced the practice and urged states and correctional facilities to impose shackling bans.

In response to these objections, multiple states have enacted antishackling legislation to restrict that practice inside prisons and jails. However, these restrictions do not ban the practice altogether. Shackling is still prevalent in prisons and jails today (Thomas et al.). Additionally, it seems that the overall regulation of shackling restrictions is minimal, allowing correctional staff to abuse the practice and use it to their discretion (Ferszt et al.; Kelsey et al.). As a result, it is difficult for researchers attempting to estimate the prevalence of shackling and the harms it imposes on pregnant inmates. However, shackling is an inhumane practice that is disproportionately harmful to expectant mothers and used as a tool to punish so-called bad mothers.

A large portion of feminist criminology literature is dedicated to examining mothers’ experiences while inside, addressing the gap in gender-responsive research. Much less research, however, has explored women’s experiences after prison with an emphasis on the women themselves. Instead, a large portion of research on justice-involved mothers after release is more concerned with the impact of incarceration on their children. Although this concept is important, more literature should explore mothers’ journeys after prison and highlight their lived experiences. Furthermore, the criminal justice system contends that it seeks to provide rehabilitative treatment to incarcerated individuals. Nevertheless, current evidence suggests that women leaving prison are unprepared for the multitude of struggles they face once released, especially mothers.

Mothers Beyond Bars

Although there are around 975,000 women under community supervision in the US, most of them mothers (Budd), little research examines the intersection of motherhood and community corrections. This poses significant problems for research examining mothers, motherhood, and experiences post-release. The existing literature provides evidence suggesting that mothers exiting prison experience unique challenges to community and family reunification compared to women who do not have children, including struggles with negative stigma, loss of parental legitimacy, substance use, lack of education, and lack of resources associated with successfully graduating parole or probation.

Women associated with the criminal justice system often experience damage to their identities and reputations due to their past. The same can especially be

said for mothers exiting prison. Andrea O'Reilly discusses in her book *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, Practice* how the institution of motherhood has primarily been influenced by patriarchy, which defines how mothers should and should not behave according to traditionalist values. Refusal to adhere to societal standards of mothering results in psychological and social consequences. This dynamic was made apparent in Lucy Baldwin's study, which interviewed previously incarcerated mothers about their emotional journey outside of prison. Some women described the shame and guilt they felt, believing that they had failed in their maternal role. Even after their release, many women explained feeling as if their identity as mothers had been "forever tarnished" due to their criminal past (Baldwin, "Motherhood"). Elizabeth Breuer and colleagues found that the stigma of being a bad mother not only emotionally affected women after prison but also interfered with reentry requirements such as finding employment. Judgment from employment and housing agencies has made community reintegration challenging, further strengthening negative stigmas around incarceration and building barriers to progress that mothers may require when trying to graduate from community supervision (Breuer et al.). Janet Garcia-Hallett's book *Invisible Mothers* further emphasizes that being a so-called good mother while also fighting to meet societal expectations as a caregiver and endure the "invisible labour" associated with mothering is challenging on its own. However, these challenges are further strained when mothers must also prove they have been reformed or rehabilitated by the justice system through community corrections requirements. Therefore, a double standard exists for mothers: They should be the primary caregivers to their children, yet they are punished for mistakes that mothers should not make. Thus, many mothers suffer long-lasting emotional and social consequences associated with failing to adhere to societal expectations of mothering and motherhood.

Children of incarcerated mothers rarely remain in the care of a parent while waiting to reunite. Many women expressed that their children were instead being cared for by their parents, siblings, and other relatives or friends due to many fathers' absences or abusive histories (Brown and Bloom). While mothers are inside, their children are often acclimating to a different home environment with new expectations, goals, and authority figures. Although reunification with their children is a moment many justice-involved mothers look forward to, it can also be a stressful transition. The temporary caregivers know more about the children's day-to-day lives and routines, making a mother's return potentially disruptive. Some children may no longer recognize their mother as a legitimate authority figure, instead deferring to the stand-in caregiver for direction. Some mothers have expressed feelings of frustration over their loss of parental authority and lack of control over family dynamics in the home, sometimes resulting in resistance and difficult behaviour from

children (Brown and Bloom). Many mothers exiting prison must undergo the process of regaining custody of their children, which can be long and create more stressors for women already facing challenges associated with community supervision and successful reentry. Lynne Haney describes how the requirements for regaining custody of their children often interfere with the many requirements set forth by corrections agencies, making it difficult to attain success in either venture. Family reunification comes with its challenges for mothers returning home, including the potential loss of parental legitimacy, difficulties rebuilding relationships with their children, and reacclimatizing to life at home. However, most studies examining mothers' return home emphasize children's perceptions of their return and examine the negative impacts of mothers' incarceration, supporting the "bad mother" label by emphasizing mothers' mistakes and their criminal past rather than understanding their perceptions of their return.

Some of the most challenging requirements for community reentry are associated with the standards set by parole. Many mothers leaving prison are presented with significant fines and fees associated with their incarceration, child support, and community corrections. Arditti and Few ("Mothers' Reentry") found that 46 per cent of their sample of recently released mothers owed an average of over \$4,000 in fines after their release. Yet most mothers lack the financial stability needed to make these payments while also staying afloat. Nationwide data on postrelease employment outcomes are limited, with reports from the Bureau of Justice Statistics reporting a 60 per cent unemployment rate among previously incarcerated people (Carson et al.; Wang and Bertrum). Analyses of data from the 2008 National Former Prisoner Survey, one of the few reports of the national unemployment rate of previously incarcerated people, revealed that between 38 and 51 per cent of formerly incarcerated women were unemployed, whereas unemployment rates for men ranged from 27 to 41 per cent (Couloute and Kopf). In contrast, a longitudinal study tracking 51,500 individuals released from federal prison in 2010 reported that only 40% of formerly incarcerated individuals were employed at any follow-up period, with those who succeeded in acquiring employment struggling with job retention (Wang and Bertrum; Carson et al.). Women were more likely than men to be employed throughout all post-release periods, yet, despite this higher employment rate, women earned significantly less, averaging \$3,200 to \$7,200 less per year than their male counterparts (Carson et al). Arditti and Few ("Mothers' Reentry") found that the average income of mothers released from prison was around \$390 per week, an income that is well below the poverty line. Additionally, mothers are discouraged from filing for unemployment or welfare and are instead pressured to find full-time employment that meets parole requirements (Brown and Bloom). However, many mothers cite significant challenges in obtaining a job. Negative

stigma about their past and lack of education often dissuades employers from offering jobs with a living wage, which makes it hard for mothers to retain employment or earn sufficient income (Arditti and Few, “Mothers’ Reentry”; “Maternal Distress”; Breuer et al.).

Among the financial challenges mothers face are struggles in obtaining reliable and affordable childcare (Edin and Lein). Already in a position where they may be unable to find stable employment, justice-involved mothers often have backgrounds of disadvantage, such as not having the network support to aid in providing child supervision. Indeed, studies have found that the price of childcare has increased since the 1990s and disproportionately affects low-income families (Abrassart and Bonoli; Ahn). For mothers serving community supervision sentences, the inability to obtain childcare can be a considerable stressor and may impede their success in community corrections.

Furthermore, it is not unusual for women to know little of the community resources available to them. This lack of knowledge can be due to a lack of information provided by their correctional office or inadequacies in the correctional organization’s ability to prepare women to reenter society (Brown and Bloom). Consequently, mothers miss out on opportunities, such as employment training, childcare, and transportation services, which are all resources that could aid mothers in community reintegration and graduating from parole and probation. Lacking education of available resources and opportunities, as a result, puts mothers at risk of recidivism and community corrections violations.

Policy and Research Recommendations

Although the article has described the challenges mothers face inside the criminal justice system, there is much opportunity to make an invisible population visible. For instance, policymakers can initiate numerous political reforms to begin banning the practice of shackling pregnant inmates for any occasion. Professional organizations, such as the American Public Health Association (APHA) Task Force on Correctional Health Care Standards, have recommended granting healthcare officials the authority to remove restraints and implementing institutional review processes led by chief correctional officers to reassess shackling decisions regularly, to prevent unnecessary restraint (Brawley and Kurnat-Thoma; APHA, “A Call”; *Standards*). Correctional organizations should move to prioritize reproductive health and prenatal healthcare for women by requiring facilities to provide comprehensive prenatal, postpartum, and mental healthcare, nutrition support, childbirth education, doula services, and maternal counselling for women and mothers (Alirezai and Roudsari). Carceral institutions should also expand prison nursery and residential parenting programs, and support

community-based residential parenting alternatives for pregnant women and mothers that include parenting classes, doula support, and early bonding opportunities (Pfeiffer et al.). Prior studies have found that such programs have shown significant reductions in return to custody within three years (Pfeiffer et al.). Correctional facilities should also help facilitate family connections through visitation and parent-child engagement. Programs such as Florida's Reading Family Ties offer video visitation, reading sessions, and family visits to preserve emotional bonds and ease transitions (Bartlett). Practitioners should also implement gender-responsive reentry programming focussed on offering gender-specific case management, cognitive-behavioural therapy, and substance abuse treatment tailored to women. These programs have been shown to reduce recidivism significantly (Miller; Stuart).

Researchers should continue to prioritize examining the lived experiences of justice-involved women by supporting qualitative and community-driven research initiatives that elevate the perspectives of women and mothers affected by incarceration, with a particular focus on those facing the greatest marginalization. Such efforts should also explore structural inequities, including racial and economic disparities in maternal health and mental health outcomes following release. Additionally, more studies should examine the broader impacts on mothers and families by promoting long-term studies that follow women's physical health, psychological wellbeing, trauma exposure, and emotional health throughout the incarceration process and beyond, capturing potential intergenerational effects of family separation. Research should also assess how maternal separation influences children's mental health, educational outcomes, and behavioural risks, as well as how reunification shapes recidivism rates and overall family stability.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted the experiences of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated mothers, revealing a troubling pattern of systemic neglect, punitive policies, and persistent stigma that continue well beyond their prison sentences. From the traumatic separation from their children to the inhumane practice of shackling during pregnancy, justice-involved mothers are subjected to a uniquely harsh form of punishment rooted in gendered expectations and racialized stereotypes. Even after release, they face overwhelming barriers to reintegration, including financial instability, damaged maternal identity, limited access to childcare, and inadequate support from community corrections. Despite the increasing visibility of women in the criminal justice system, policies and programming remain deeply misaligned with their needs. To truly support justice-involved mothers, there must be a shift towards gender-responsive, trauma-informed, and family-centred approaches that recognize

the intersectional burdens they carry. Future research and policy reform must centre the voices and experiences of these women not only to promote their wellbeing but also to disrupt the generational cycles of disadvantage that incarceration perpetuates.

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Reclaiming Agency in the Caesarean Birth Story: Reading Birth Pleasure in the Colombian Childbirth Anthology *Partos*

This article focusses on birth narratives from the 2024 Colombian anthology Partos (Childbirth), in which the body in pleasure functions as a protagonist in the medical space and as an instrument of resistance. Renata Serna Hosie's "Nadie sabe lo que puede un cuerpo" ("Nobody Knows What a Body Can Do"), María Paula Molina's "Aprendí a ser hija cuando fui madre" ("I Learned to Be a Daughter When I Became a Mother"), and Ana Lucía Daza Ferrer's "Abril nació en mayo" ("April Was Born in May") chronicles humanized caesarean births, demonstrating that agential childbirth and birth pleasure are possible in a hospitalized or medically-assisted birth. In these birth stories, the medical space becomes a secondary character, allowing the birthing subject to assume the protagonist role while challenging the typical medicalized version of a caesarean birth. In demystifying these births for their readers, all three authors portray them through the birthing body, prioritizing it, as well as its experiences and feelings, over the medical procedure, which reminds us that birth pleasure can and should be part of the caesarean birth story.

Is birth pleasure possible? Can childbirth be pleasurable? These questions, which have traditionally been met with disapproval and even contempt, have become increasingly common on Reddit or on other pregnancy and childbirth forums over the last decade.¹ Yet studies of birth pleasure predate the social media boom, as birthing subjects have long problematized traditional representations of childbirth that emphasize labour pain and delivery while denying birthing pleasure. Birth pleasure, as defined by Elisabeth Berger Bolaza, refers to "the presence of enjoyable somatic, mental, and/or emotional states and/or sensations, including sensual, sexual, and nonsexual sensations, orgasm or orgasmlike sensations, joy, ecstasy, and/or euphoria, regardless of the presence of pain or other states, emotions, sensations typically considered

unpleasant, in the process of a person giving birth, including all stages of labour, parturition, and the immediate postpartum period” (132). Batya Weinbaum argues that pleasure is often prevented and even refused in medicalized childbirth because birth is understood “as a mechanical production process with a timed script that birthing mothers must follow” because women “are often treated as wombs at the end of reproductive technologies in the battle over women’s rights and freedoms” (215, 217). In recounting her own birth story in *Islands of Women and Amazons*, Weinbaum explains that she hired a traditional Maya midwife in Isla Mujeres to assist during her childbirth because she “wanted to participate in the creation of my own birthing” (223) by avoiding the instilling of fear of traditional Western medicine. Emphasizing physical or emotional pleasure during childbirth can “be considered part of the ‘primitive’ birth technology, when pitted against the ultimate opposite, those products of a larger technology—anesthesia, forceps, and statistics” (231). For Weinbaum, birth pleasure includes “folklore, storytelling, [and] the oral development of meta-nature narratives ... and the singing of folk songs” (231). By creating her own birthing story and instilling it with pleasure and not fear, Weinbaum not only recuperates performing pleasure during childbirth but also reclaims the pleasure of narrating childbirth.

Although accounts of birth pleasure continue surfacing, especially online, underscoring that childbirth can indeed be pleasurable, Berger Bolaza underlines that “[d]espite a few higher profile publications that have drawn considerable media and academic attention and criticism, pleasure experienced in birth remains largely invisible, ignored, or actively ridiculed” (124). While the idea that giving birth can be pleasurable or should be pleasurable has a long history, it has been censored and silenced—as is often the case with women’s bodies and, in particular, women’s sexual pleasure—giving way to the more prominent representation of childbirth as painful, even torturous. Indeed, the prevailing representation of the birthing subject is a suffering one; they are in excruciating pain due to overwhelming contractions and passively submit to what the medical professionals decide. According to Phoebe Crossing, “Orgasmic birth, alternatively referred to as ‘ecstatic’ birth, and the idea of sexual pleasure in childbirth are notions that have circulated in anecdotal literature for decades, and yet these perspectives have not translated into midwifery or anthropological spheres of research” (464). Like the literature on maternal health, where “pleasure is all but absent” (Berger Bolaza 125), literary accounts of pleasure during childbirth have been traditionally silenced until the advent of social media and the literary boom of the birth story.

By birth story, I am referring to a first-person account by the birthing subject of the labour and childbirth experience. Testimonial in nature, birth narratives rely on the experience, the sensations of the birth-giving body, and are a

corporeal type of writing, “*partoescritura*,” or birth writing. I am using the term *partoescritura*,” birth writing, to define the type of writing that is born from childbirth and that emerges from a self that reflects upon the experiences and feelings of the birthing body. Often, birth stories do a sort of restorative and resistance work, especially if the birthing subject lacked agency during the childbirth process, which has often been the case in the medicalized space of the labour and delivery room. Kim Hensley Owens proposes that many women “who write birth stories and post them online do so in part to retroactively reassert rhetorical agency over their own births, as well as to offer other women ways of understanding, writing their ways into, and asserting feminist rhetorical agency over their own birth experiences” (2). Birth stories, therefore, are not usually written at the time of childbirth because a person does not simultaneously give birth and write about it; they return, through memory, to that moment, to that state of the body. There is a clear corporeality to this writing because it invokes and invites the body to the page, to take centre stage. The birthing body is featured; it protagonizes the birth story, so it is tactile, auditory, olfactory, as well as visual. All the senses are invoked and are involved in the (re)telling of the childbirth narrative. It is this corporeal retelling that restores agency to the birthing subject that perhaps lacked agency at the time of childbirth.

Whether detailing the pleasure experienced during childbirth or reading pleasure back into the experience of giving birth, women writers emphasize birth pleasure in their *partoescritura*, even invoking the presence or the representation of the erotic body in their birth narratives. According to Crossing, “The concept of pleasure in the birthing room contradicts the generalised perception of birth as a painful event” (465). She continues: “Although pain is a normal physiological element of childbirth, attitudes of western culture generally regard labour pain as pathological” (465). Pain during childbirth is pathologized based on Western culture’s perception of labour and birth not only as painful but also as a pain that needs to be treated pharmacologically. For this reason, pain often takes precedence in women’s birth stories, as Crossing emphasizes (465). Seeking pleasure in childbirth, however, goes hand in hand with women’s increased demand that their agency during childbirth is also respected, especially in the medicalized space, without having to take on the role of the good patient. Yet what about medicalized births or, more specifically, caesarean births? Can caesarean births be pleasurable?

This article focusses on caesarean birth stories from the 2024 Colombian anthology *Partos (Childbirth)*, where the body in pleasure functions as a protagonist in the medical space. *Partos* includes the stories of twenty-one women who narrate the particularities of their birth-giving experiences, including home births, hospital births, as well as births that take place with

the help of midwives, doulas, medical professionals, or a combination of these. *Partos* provides a testimonial space where birthing subjects write from the birthing body, detailing their varied childbirth experiences. The editors and compilers of the anthology, Cristina Consuegra and Alejandra Hernández, explain that *Partos* started as a chat in which Consuegra asked her friends, who were also mothers, “indistintamente de su oficio” (regardless of their profession), to write their birthing experiences as part of a collective learning experience emphasizing the solidarity between them (16). *Partos* was born from a need for storytelling that opposes “la medicalización del parto, la violencia obstétrica y la normalización de la narrativa dominante de la salud sexual femenina que hace creer que no somos soberanas de nuestros cuerpos y tampoco dueñas de nuestros partos” (the medicalization of childbirth, obstetric violence, and the normalization of the dominant narrative of female sexual health—which leads us to believe that we are neither sovereign over our bodies nor in control of childbirth) (16).

Although Consuegra and Hernández specify that the twenty-one contributors share a similar material and cultural context—they were all interested in natural childbirth and were informed about their birthing options—each birth story underlines “la singularidad de cada parto” (the distinct nature of each childbirth experience) and what it means to write the body (18). Although most of the birth stories occur in Colombia, Consuegra and Hernández confirm that they wanted these birth stories to function as “testimonios que hablaran del contexto colombiano y latinoamericano, sin pretender con esto lograr ninguna representatividad” (testimonies grounded in the Colombian and Latin American context, without intending to achieve representativeness) (17). What these childbirth testimonies do intend to achieve is to break the silence around childbirth and emphasize a birthing subject’s right to a humanized childbirth, whether it is a home birth or a hospital birth, a natural or a medically-assisted birth. As the writer Andrea Cote explains in the anthology’s prologue, these texts underscore the knowledge of the pregnant and birthing body that has been displaced and denied in society (23).

Renata Serna Hosie’s “Nadie sabe lo que puede un cuerpo” (“Nobody Knows What a Body Can Do”), María Paula Molina’s “Aprendí a ser hija cuando fui madre” (“I Learned to Be a Daughter When I Became a Mother”), and Ana Lucía Daza Ferrer’s “Abril nació en mayo” (“April Was Born in May”) are the only three birth stories in *Partos* that detail a humanized caesarean birth. I propose that these three birth narratives allow the reader to become new witnesses to the lived birthing experience of each mother and how agential childbirth and birth pleasure are possible in a medically-assisted birth. Phoebe Barton argues the following: “The idealised births promoted by natural birth advocates can be insufficient when confronted with the realities of negotiating

care and interventions in hospital settings, and create feelings of failure if medical intervention is chosen or required. This speaks to the needs [sic] for systemic changes in how health care and birth are approached to support self-determination" (37). These stories demonstrate that humanized caesareans can be read as birth pleasure. Barton affirms that we should be able "to celebrate and advocate for freedom, bodily autonomy and respectful care in birth without reinforcing discourses of 'natural' births as 'good' to the exclusion of other birthing experiences" (37). The natural birthing option and the pressures associated with it have become the new cultural script that birthing women are supposed to abide by if they are to be considered good mothers. Yet these births are not possible or are not chosen by some mothers.

Della Pollock shows that hegemonic birth narratives not only lock "new parents into a narrative script" but also strengthen certain taboos "about so-called failed births" (5). Speaking about so-called failed births, Lucy Jones argues that "[w]omen are made to feel that they have failed if they haven't achieved an intervention-free, analgesic-free birth" (61-62). For Jones, the "uncritical embrace of 'natural childbirth'" oppresses and silences birthing women through the mechanism of shame (67). Instead, the three birth stories analyzed here underline that a positive caesarean experience can be a form of birth pleasure, thus complicating the idea that the natural birthing option is the only good birthing option.

In the prologue to *Partos*, Cote affirms that birth is often a repressed corporeal experience, rarely given visibility. When it is made visible, it is presented as terrifying and mysterious (23). As scholars such as Berger Bolaza, Crossing, and Owens, among others, have underscored, prevailing representations of childbirth emphasize suffering and pain while underlining women's passivity during the experience. Serna Hosie's, Molina's, and Daza Ferrer's birth stories present caesarean birth not as an act of suffering and pain, but as an agential act of pleasure. Cote explains that the birth narratives that comprise the anthology showcase the following: "Parir es también un acto de amor. Hay momentos de la descripción de estos trances que están poblados de profundo erotismo, en el cuidado del cuerpo, con la pareja, en el gozo que trae el contacto con la piel del hijo" (Giving birth is also an act of love. There are moments in the description of these experiences that are imbued with profound eroticism—in the care of the body, in intimacy with the partner, in the joy that comes from the contact with your child's skin) (27). Arguably, a new consciousness of the birthing body emerges in these birth narratives, precisely because pleasure is given prominence. As Cote puts it: "¿Qué quiere decir, entonces, parir? Quizás sea regresar a una conciencia del cuerpo y con ella recuperar territorios y saberes perdidos y comprometerse a respetarlos" (What does it mean, then, to give birth? Perhaps it means returning to a body consciousness, and with it, recovering lost territories and knowledge, and

committing to honor them) (29). Although Cote is not referring specifically to pleasure, the body consciousness she describes includes the body in pleasure during childbirth—the silenced knowledge that pleasure can be a part of the childbirth experience, including in humanized caesarean births. In these birth stories, the medical space becomes a secondary character, allowing the birthing subject to assume the protagonist role while challenging the typical medicalized version of a caesarean birth.

Renata Serna Hosie's "Nadie sabe lo que puede un cuerpo"

Renata Serna Hosie's "Nadie sabe lo que puede un cuerpo" depicts pregnancy as a time of self-reflection and self-discovery, as "el viaje único, grandioso y fugaz de la dulce espera. El cultivo de la autoobservación. La necesaria e inevitable pregunta por aquello que llevo dentro, con luces y sombras" (the unique, profound, and fleeting journey of pregnancy. The cultivation of self-observation. The necessary and inevitable questioning of what I carry within me, with its lights and shadows) (73). Beginning with the pregnant body, this birth story recognizes that pregnancy entails becoming another version of ourselves as does childbirth: "Nos reconocemos en otras versiones posibles de nosotras mismas, salvajes o intuitivas, ilusionadas o perdidas" (We recognize ourselves in other possible versions of who we are—wild or intuitive, hopeful or lost) (74). Recounting parts of her pregnancy experience, Serna Hosie emphasizes the new relationship with the body that occurs during pregnancy, one that is both agential and pleasurable. In fact, this birth story underscores not the uncontrollability or rebelliousness of the pregnant body, but instead its aliveness, its presence. As she affirms, "Yo sentía mi cuerpo más vivo que nunca" (I felt my body more alive than ever) (74).

At week thirty-nine of her pregnancy, Serna Hosie's medical exams reveal that the placenta was no longer supporting the baby's growth and that a natural birth would put the baby at risk. She explains how "ese parto que yo había soñado, para el cual me había preparado y por el cual estaba dispuesta a hacer lo que fuera, se nublaba. Me resistí, se resistió mi voluntad y mi razón.... Divagué y lloré mares mientras caminaba por lo que no podía ser" (that birth I had dreamed of, for which I had prepared myself and for which I was willing to do anything, began to fade. I resisted; my will and my reason resisted.... I wandered and cried oceans as I walked through what could not be) (78). The next day she prepares herself for the hospital, bathing herself in "manzanilla, toronjil y cidrón" (chamomile, lemon balm, and lemon verbena) and then practising movement and meditation exercises as part of her holistic birthing plan. Once she arrives with her partner Alejandro at the Clínica del Country in Bogotá, she is greeted by her obstetrician, Susana Bueno, who, according to Serna Hosie, is one of the few obstetricians who understand and

fight for respectful and humanized childbirth in Colombia. Although not the childbirth experience she wished for, she creates a spiritual, ritualized space for her caesarean thanks to Bueno's support. Able to transform the clinical space into one of pleasure, she describes the first step of her humanized caesarean journey when she receives the anesthesia as "una deliciosa locura" (a delicious madness), which keeps her ecstatic and excited (79). Because she has previously discussed the elements of a humanized caesarean with Bueno, Serna Hosie knows to expect that—Alejando will be with her, childbirth will be in a calm and silent space, the clamping of the umbilical cord will take place once it stops pulsating, and skin-to-skin will occur after childbirth, as well as breastfeeding if possible (79). Once she begins to feel this pleasure, and because she is informed about humanized caesareans, her fears and doubts dissipate, allowing the birthing body to prevail in this narrative. Pleasure, therefore, functions to assure that the birthing body is an agential body during childbirth.

While the description of her caesarean is rather short, as Serna Hosie calls it a whirlwind followed by a push, the birth narrative pauses to chronicle how her daughter Julia is taken out of her body with love by Bueno and then quickly placed on her chest as she happily cries. Crying not out of pain or disappointment, but out of pleasure, Serna Hosie learns "que para que la cesárea humanizada se lleve a cabo, además del papel del o la ginecobstetra, se necesita que todos los miembros del equipo (anestesiólogo, pediatra, enfermera) estén también sintonizados con este modelo" (for a humanized caesarean section to take place, in addition to the role of the obstetrician, it is essential that all members of the team—anesthesiologist, paediatrician, nurse—are also aligned with this model) (80). Serna Hosie ends her birth story by addressing all women: "Si estamos abiertas, si estamos conectadas, todas las respuestas y los caminos son asombro y perplejidad por lo que puede un cuerpo" (If we are open, if we are connected, all the answers and paths are full of wonder and awe at the potential of the body") (80). As she tells the story of her own caesarean, one she did not plan for, Serna Hosie showcases that pleasure in childbirth becomes synonymous with being able to advocate for the birthing body, allowing it to lead, whether in a medical or nonmedical space.

María Paula Molina's "Aprendí a ser hija cuando fui madre"

María Paula Molina's "Aprendí a ser hija cuando fui madre" begins by documenting the changes, both physical and mental, experienced during her pregnancy and how this leads to creative endeavours that represent the maternal experience despite her initial fears that "no quería ser vista como la que solo habla de maternidad" (I didn't want to be seen as the one who only

talks about motherhood) (122). Molina, also known by her artistic name XMARIALUNAX, is a Bogotá-born, México-based graphic designer and illustrator, whose birth story takes place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Like Serna Hosie, Molina chronicles how the maternal experience includes unexpected, life-altering changes: “Si algo sabemos las madres es que los planes son más un destino que un camino recto. Y que se aprende a navegar las olas de lo inesperado” (If there’s one thing mothers know, it’s that plans are more of a destination than a straight path. And that you learn to navigate the waves of the unexpected) (123). Indeed, Molina’s birth story is precisely that—a showcasing of how to navigate the waves of the unexpected, especially when a mother must alter her birth plan.

Molina emphasizes how when her water breaks at one in the morning, she is surprised that “No fue nada de lo que esperaba, lo que había visto en las películas. No fue doloroso. ¡Fue muy placentero! ... Y la cantidad y fuerza con la que salía el agua me daba cosquillas” (It was nothing like what I expected, like what I’d seen in the movies. It wasn’t painful. It was very pleasurable! ... And the amount and force with which the water came out tickled me) (125). This pleasure, however, gives way to more intense contractions, which she depicts as waves breaking her apart. As the waves of contractions and pain intensify, she modifies her birth plan. While she had previously envisioned her husband, her mother, and her midwives with her throughout the process, she now wants something different: “Quería oscuridad y silencio, no quería palabras motivadoras ni un recuento de frases positivas. Necesitaba estar sola y permitirme gritar y quejarme, y eso hice” (I wanted darkness and silence. I didn’t want motivational words or a list of positive reaffirmations. I needed to be alone and allow myself to scream and complain, and that’s what I did) (126). As one painful contraction ends and another begins, Molina describes how she never felt calm but instead fearful of the next bout of pain. The initial pleasure she felt when her water broke gives way not only to painful contractions but to an increasing fear of the birthing body.

After spending various hours in pain, Molina realizes that “No quería sufrir. Algo dentro de mí me hizo saber que esto no estaba bien. Así no era como quería recordar el nacimiento de Astor. Doloroso y sufrido. Así que les dije a mi madre y a Alejandro que me llevaran a un hospital y que quería una cesárea” (I didn’t want to suffer. Something inside me told me this wasn’t right. This wasn’t how I wanted to remember Astor’s birth—painful and full of suffering. So, I told my mom and Alejandro to take me to a hospital and that I wanted a caesarean) (126). Although her husband and her mother try to dissuade her at first, thinking she is having a moment of intense vulnerability and fragility, Molina convinces them that this is what she wants and that she is fully conscious of her decision.

The birth story then moves from Molina's home to the hospital, where she meets with the medical team that will deliver Astor. Molina chronicles how they all introduce themselves and explain everything that will happen. Her midwives, who are present and make sure that she experiences a humanized caesarean, play the songs that she chose for Astor's birth, and ensure Alejandro, her partner, can be by her side. Like Serna Hosie's humanized caesarean narrative, Molina's story details a caesarean experience that is agential and pleasurable as she transforms the clinical space into her birthing space. The doctors make sure to respect the parents' wishes, creating a silent environment for Astor's birth so that the first thing he hears will be his parents. As she sees her son born, "todo y todos en la sala desaparecieron para mí. Todo se hizo borroso. Solo existía él viniendo hacia mí. Yo lloraba y reía con la misma intensidad, sentía que se me iba el aire porque la risa y el llanto no dejaban espacio para nada más. Nunca había sentido tal éxtasis, tal euforia, tal felicidad" (everything and everyone in the room disappeared for me. Everything became blurry. There was only him, coming toward me. I cried and laughed with the same intensity, feeling like I was running out of breath because the laughter and the crying left no room for anything else. I had never felt such ecstasy, such euphoria, such happiness) (127).

Molina's birth narrative functions as a counternarrative in that it showcases how pleasure can also be present during a humanized caesarean. This work underscores that natural births are not the only ones that can be pleasurable because the body-in-pleasure can also be present during a caesarean if the birthing subject's agency is respected.

Molina ends her story by affirming that she is happy and at peace with her birth story because she listened to herself and silenced other voices, including her own. Initially thinking that pleasure would only be possible during a natural water birth at home, Molina's birth story details her decision-making process during her childbirth experience, emphasizing that it was her agency that made her birth pleasure possible with the support of her midwives and the medical personnel. In fact, Molina's final words are directed to her readers: "Esta sensación de estar feliz y con una sonrisa mientras cuentas cómo pariste es algo que todas merecemos, qué distinto sería que cada [vez] que leemos o escuchamos una historia de parto, la mujer esté en paz y contenta con cómo lo vivió" (The experience of feeling joyful and smiling while telling your birth story is something we all deserve. How different it would be if every time we read or hear a birth story the woman felt at peace and happy with how she experienced it) (128). Molina proposes that birth pleasure should be part of every birth story. Every birth story, be it natural or caesarean, deserves to be pleasurable and read in pleasure.

Ana Lucía Daza Ferrer's "Abril nació en mayo"

Countering the traditional birth narrative, Ana Lucía Daza Ferrer's "Abril nació en mayo" first documents the loss of her first child. According to Pollock, the hegemonic birth narrative story "simply lacks room for stillbirth, miscarriage, abortion, all deformity—aberrations in the 'normal' scheme of things apparently too embarrassing or too grotesque to mention" (5). In this first part of her birth story, Daza Ferrer, however, gives visibility to the often-silenced issue of miscarriage, emphasizing the grief and trauma of losing a child: "Es el dolor más grande que he sentido, física y emocionalmente, cuando tuve que parir una bebé sin vida, en compañía de Daniel en el baño de nuestro apartamento. Me cuesta expresar lo duro que es traer al mundo a un ser sin vida, para mí es un recuerdo borroso. Es un parto del que muy poco se habla a pesar de ser tan común" (It's the greatest pain I've ever felt, both physically and emotionally, when I had to give birth to a stillborn baby, accompanied by Daniel in the bathroom of our apartment. I find it hard to express how difficult it is to bring a stillborn baby into the world; it remains a fragmented and blurred memory. Stillbirth is a form of birth that is rarely talked about, despite being so common) (144). This trauma then informs her next pregnancy journey, one that she describes as filled with fear: "Siempre tuve miedo. Anhelaba las citas médicas solo para oír su corazón latir.... El miedo empezó a disminuir cuando se empezó a mover, a comunicarme con sus piernas y manos que estaba ahí, que estaba bien" (I lived in constant fear. I looked forward to medical appointments just to hear the baby's heartbeat.... The fear began to subside once the baby started to move, to communicate through their legs and hands that they were there, that they were okay) (145). For Daza Ferrer, the medical space is one that brought her comfort during her pregnancy as she anxiously awaits giving birth. Now reflecting on this fear, Daza Ferrer suggests that motherhood is a combination of intense love and permanent fear; one simply learns to live with pleasure and pain.

This combination of pain and pleasure is found throughout Daza Ferrer's narrative; she relates the pain of losing her first child with the pleasure of Abril's birth a year later. Different from other birth stories, Daza Ferrer recounts her familiarity with the clinical space due to the loss of her first baby, but also because of her accident, having undergone multiple surgeries in the same clinic where Abril would later be born. In fact, Daza Ferrer chooses her obstetrician, Ana Lucía, because she worked in the clinic where they wanted Abril's birth to take place. As Abril's birth nears, Ana Lucía speaks to Daza Ferrer about scheduling her caesarean due to how large her baby is and the risks associated with giving birth to a baby this size. Daniel asks her how she wants to proceed, and Daza Ferrer clarifies that "accedí a programar la cesárea. Yo lo único que quería era que naciera y que se fuera el miedo de perderla ... le

hice caso al sistema, en donde cada vez son más comunes las cesáreas (por lo menos en Colombia)” (I agreed to schedule the caesarean. All I wanted was for her to be born and for the fear of losing her to go away.... I complied with the system, in which caesarean births are increasingly common—at least in Colombia) (148). Although Daza Ferrer does not discuss this in detail, there is a sense of regret in Daza Ferrer’s birth story as she wonders if a vaginal birth would have been possible if she had waited an extra week (148).

Chronicling her caesarean journey, Daza Ferrer mentions how strange it was to arrive at the hospital with Daniel “sin romper fuente, sin dolores intensos” (without the rupture of membranes, without severe pain) (148). Like the previously discussed birth stories, Daza Ferrer also experiences a humanized caesarean as an agential birthing subject in the medical space. Even though she cannot see what is happening on the other side of the curtain, the narrative pauses to illustrate her caesarean, taking care to note the different steps that form part of a caesarean birth:

Primero, una incisión horizontal de cerca de quince centímetros en el abdomen, encima del área púbica. Después, con mucho cuidado el bisturí abriendo el útero y el saco amniótico donde mi bebé estaba tan plácida que no quería salir. De ahí, Ana Lucía tomando la cabeza de Abril con sus manos para sacarla, mientras que su ayudante empujaba mi panza para contribuir. Cuatro manos haciendo el trabajo del útero.

First, a horizontal incision of about fifteen centimetres across the abdomen, just above the pubic area. Then, with great care, the scalpel opened the uterus and the amniotic sac, where my baby was so calm that she didn’t want to come out. From there, Ana Lucía took Abril’s head in her hands to deliver her, while her assistant pushed on my belly to help. Four hands doing the work of the uterus. (150)

Daza Ferrer demystifies the surgery for her readers, explaining that she could feel what the doctors were doing and therefore imagine it. By portraying what it felt like in her body instead of what was done to her, Daza Ferrer gives agency to her body during her birth story. Put differently, the body is both active and agential as Daza Ferrer prioritizes the birthing body, its experiences and feelings, over the actual surgery. There is pleasure in recounting the memories of the birthing body.

As they deliver her baby, Daza Ferrer describes how “Me sentí como en un trance, como si estuviéramos juntas en el universo.... La pusieron a mi lado, en mi hombro izquierdo y nos juntamos por primera vez como familia. Lloramos” (I felt as if I were in a trance, as if we were alone in the universe.... They placed her next to me, on my left shoulder, and we came together for the first time as a family. We cried) (150). Again, pleasure and beauty are emphasized in this caesarean birth narrative, defying the stereotypical medicalized version. Like

the previous birth stories, the medical space becomes a secondary character, allowing the birthing subject to assume the protagonist role. Moreover, as Daza Ferrer underlines, the medical space, a space previously imbued with suffering due to her accident, is resignified and transformed due to Abril's birth story. Daza Ferrer ends her narrative by underscoring the empathy that she now feels towards other mothers, including her own, stressing that motherhood is a combination of pain (fear) and pleasure (joy).

Conclusion

In her birth story "Parto-Escritura" ("Birth Writing"), Colombian writer and poet Fátima Vélez explores the connection between writing and childbirth: "Ya quisiera escribir con la intensidad de un parto, ya quisiera escribir con esa inevitabilidad. Afectar con la escritura como un parto afecta las vidas de las personas involucradas, como cuando una ve un parto, como cuando una vive un parto, con esa fuerza que hace que, por un instante, al menos, nos entreguemos a la inminencia" (249–50) (I wish I could write with the intensity of childbirth, with that same sense of inevitability. To affect through writing in the way childbirth affects the lives of the people involved—like when one witnesses a birth, like when one experiences childbirth—with that force that, if only for an instant, compels us to surrender to what is imminent). In her examination of the analogy between birth and writing—that is, giving birth to writing—Vélez's description of childbirth underlines the intensity and inevitability that are part of the childbirth experience. According to Vélez, the analogy often made between writing and giving birth is incorrect because one can only wish to write with the same intensity as childbirth. Birth writing, as depicted by Vélez, must affect us and make us witnesses to the effects it had on those who formed part of the birthing experience, principally the birthing subject.

To write about childbirth is an agential, testimonial act, as it serves as an archive of birth histories for others to learn from and as forms of resistance. These stories work as counternarratives, as they counter the medicalized caesarean story and the natural childbirth discourse, which leaves no room for birth pleasure in caesarean births. In all three stories, these first-time mothers advocate for themselves, and with the publication of their birth narratives, they also advocate for women's agency during caesarean births. As Owens reminds us, "Women write [birth stories] for themselves, achieving catharsis, but they also write for others in an effort to inform, guide, and connect with other women" (143). In demystifying caesarean births for their readers, all three authors portray them through the birthing body, prioritizing its experiences and feelings over the medical procedure and reminding us that birth pleasure can and should be part of every birth story.

Endnotes

1. In the popular Reddit group Baby Bumps, which was created in 2010, one can find questions like “How many of you have had an orgasmic birthing experience?” or “Has anyone had an ‘orgasmic’ vaginal birth?” as well as popular searches for “pleasure-based birthing.”
2. Berger Bolaza suggests that although we are starting to see birth pleasure addressed in more mainstream publications “directed towards lay pregnant women” (124), it necessitates further investigation, since “no representative population-level studies have examined the incidence or prevalence of pleasurable birth” (125).
3. All the works in *Partos* were originally written in Spanish by the birthing individuals. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.
4. Laura Tolton and Marcos Claudio Signorelli observe that there is no national law in Colombia that explicitly defines or criminalizes obstetric violence. They clarify that obstetric violence, understood as a form of gender-based violence, “can be explained as struggles between levels in a hierarchy of knowledge.... A consequence of such a hierarchy is that knowledge seen as authoritative is legitimated in discourse and actions, and other kinds of knowledge are devalued or even dismissed” (174). In fact, the authors emphasize that the struggles “between these levels of knowledge often play out when there are contradictions between the mother’s understanding and that of the medical team” (174).
5. Moreover, to underline this uniqueness, each of the twenty-one childbirth stories in *Partos* is accompanied by an illustration drawn by Alejandra Hernández.
6. According to Consuegra and Hernández, they reached out to the twenty-one contributors and invited them to write their birth story as part of the anthology. While most of the birth stories occur in Colombia, María Paula Molina’s story takes place in Mexico, since Molina is currently residing there.
7. Jennifer Zambrano’s “El oleaje” (The Swell) also recounts a caesarean birth, but it is a birth story about obstetric violence and not a humanized caesarean birth story.
8. Tess Cosslett argues that the natural childbirth discourse opposes the medicalized discourse, yet they are “the two dominant or ‘official’ discourses about childbirth in our culture, since both of them have the power to shape the way childbirth is conducted and organised” (4).
9. Serna Hosie’s title may be referencing a statement attributed to the philosopher Baruch Spinoza regarding the limits as well as the unknown capacity of the human body, of what a body can do. Trained in psychology, literature, and dance, Serna Hosie focusses on discovering the potential of

the body throughout movement, employing corporeal movement as a form of healing from trauma. She is also the executive director of the Colombian foundation, Prolongar. In her birth story, she describes allowing her body to move as if it were being led by her placenta.

10. A Bogotá-based doctor, Susana Bueno is mentioned in a few of the anthologies' birth stories as the medical obstetrician treating the pregnant and birthing subject. According to her site, Bueno offers a holistic and compassionate approach centred on the importance of respectful maternity care that combines conventional medicine with alternative therapies. It is because of Bueno's support that Serna Hosie can create a kind of holistic environment in the medical space.
11. As she explains on her site, "Her work explores all the lights and shadows of the female experience, memoria and social justice, the experience of motherhood, and the sweetness and joy of the daily routines." Molina's work is heavily influenced by her maternal experience and forms a crucial part of her art.
12. The birth story does not name the hospital, but we learn that it is the one that her midwives recommended.
13. Díaz Ferrer is an ecologist, who works in sustainability planning as well as environmental and social management.

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RACHAEL BOULTON

The Eco-Heroine Path to Support Unacknowledged Miscarriage in Ireland

This article is written in response to current research surrounding miscarriage trauma, which largely excludes women’s voices and lived experiences. It explores the mythical framework of the eco-heroine as useful for supporting those living with unacknowledged miscarriage trauma in complementarity with eco-arts practices. Motivated by a personal journey to healing from miscarriage through ecopsychology, eco-arts and Celtic mythology, this article is part of a wider exploration that aims to restore reproductive rituals and reimagine myths for pregnancy loss. The article discusses native Irish woodlands’ healing potential for miscarriage and how these may be placed in an expressive eco-arts practice, such as papermaking.



Figure 1. *Dreaming the Field* (Author’s own photograph, 2024)

Introduction

November 2024 marked a new chapter in my life where I would begin a profound journey into healing from repressed miscarriage trauma. Old friends commented that I was a shadow of myself, and it was indeed a banished shadow that needed to be faced in the deepest recesses of the cave. Reverie may be described as a dreamlike meditation, and practising reverie in nature, coupled with participation in eco-arts, cultivated an ecological awakening, which contributed to my healing from the complicated loss of an unacknowledged miscarriage.

Inspired by Sharon Blackie's work with the eco-heroine, I explore how acts of reverie in nature support the creation of new rituals and artistic practices that could be therapeutic for women following miscarriage and how they might inspire contemporary women struggling with feelings of maternal failure.

Ecological Awakening for Personal and Collective Healing

Beneath the outer layers of our neocortex and what we learnt in school,
the story is in us—the story of deep kinship with all life, bringing
strengths that we never imagined.

When we claim this story as our innermost sense of who we are,
a gladness comes that will help us to survive.

—Joanna Macy 245

Blackie describes the eco-heroine journey as a “call to life” (86). In Blackie's call to life, we rise above the feeling of stasis to “take up our part in the great unfolding of the world” (86). I would add to Blackie's call that the eco-heroine also integrates and transcends above hiraeth—the deep, long mourning for something that never was.

It was not until I experienced the initiations of childbirth and miscarriage at midlife that I rediscovered myself as part of our animate planet. Reverie in native woodlands and rewilding sites, coupled with reciprocal eco-art making, enabled me to reconnect to nature and the value of archetypes and myths associated with it. Archetypes and myths cannot be categorized into neat little files. Rather, they embrace ambiguity and remind us that our wounds help us to heal others. As Macy shares, “The sorrow, grief, and rage you feel are a measure of your own humanity and your evolutionary maturity. As your heart breaks open, you create room for the world to heal” (241). With nature and mythology as useful to addressing ambiguous loss in mind, an eco-heroine framework may support women through the complicated grief of miscarriage.

Fostering Native Woodlands for Personal and Collective Ensouled Regeneration

A tree climbed there. O pure uprising!
 O Orpheus sings! O towering tree of hearing!
 And all was still. Yet even in that hush
 a new beginning, hint, and change, was there.
 —Rainer Maria Rilke (166)

On the rugged plains of West Clare, in one of Ireland's native woodlands, I learned that birch, my favourite tree, is associated with birch in folkloric medicine. The first letter of the Ogham alphabet, Beith, is named after the birch tree and is a symbol of healing and fertility in Irish Celtic mythology.

In these woods, I sat with a dying birch in a state of reverie. In this interconnected state of reciprocity, it was not clear whether I was helping the tree or the tree was helping me. I was reminded of Carl Jung's quote: "At times I feel like I am spread out over the landscape and inside things and am myself living in every tree, in the splashing of the waves, in the clouds and the animals that come and go, in the procession of the seasons" (252). Later that day, I discovered that I had synchronistically used birch leaves in a representation of self (as shown in Figure 2, which depicts the use of natural materials, such as clay, sand, and birch leaves) during a truth mandala art therapy exercise. The instinctive and mythological aspects of human nature had expressed themselves through creative imagination, offering new perspectives on how ecology, reverie, and imagination could culminate in therapeutic arts for fertility-related traumas in contemporary Ireland.

With Ireland's commitment to preserving ancient woodlands and rejuvenating the land through rewilding initiatives, such practices could support women through their fertility journey, evidenced by the emergence of tree symbolism in clinical art therapy with women and families grieving from miscarriage. One project, titled *Me as Tree*, invited grieving mothers to participate in art therapy, imagining themselves as trees. The lead researcher on this project explains its objective: "The metaphor of Nature and her enduring, cyclical ebb and flow seems to offer reassurance to women in the context of their pregnancy disturbance, even whilst they experience fragility and undoingness" (Sophia Xeros-Constantinides 143).

In *Lost and Found: Locating Meaning*, art therapist Claire Flahavan says a willow tree supported a lamenting father, Richard, after the loss of his unborn child: "Richard described this daily encounter with the willow tree as an invitation to be in contact, even for brief moments, with his feelings about the lost baby, whom he and Christine imagined to have been a girl, Poppy" (65). The willow tree is a frequent symbol that arises following miscarriage, and its

cleansing properties lead back to the Celtic creation myth, placing the willow's location in wetlands as a bond between the psychic and the physical through a contemplative, liminal space that offers a symbol of hope, healing, and new growth.



Figure 2. *Birch Truth Mandala* (Author's work, 2024)

Shortly after my first pregnancy loss, in which I feared for my life and was left without any information, help, or support as to what to do with the remains, I moved to a smallholding in West Kerry. We had one good field, as the farmers told us, and the rest was a mess. The land was never suitable for agriculture; it was destroyed by heavy machinery, which left the ground too dangerous to walk on. One willow stood in the corner of the garden, and on one bright and chilly morning, we buried our loss underneath it. For the time we lived in that house, I hated the fields, and I was convinced the fields hated me. I was haunted by the thick wetness of the land. It felt hostile, as if it did not want me there.

In recalling his field experience, which explored emotional relationships with land, terrapsychological researcher Kevin Filocamo shares, “My body was responding to something that has life. More: that this ‘something’—this tree—was not only alive but ... we were ‘waking each other up’ to each other’s existence” (89).



Figure 3. *Willow Rewilding at Home* (Author's image, 2024)

A few years passed, and things changed. The land became covered in willows (as shown in Figure 3), and cows kept breaking out of their gates to eat our trees for their antibacterial properties. The willows decontaminated the soil and water, enhanced biodiversity, and laid the groundwork for native woodlands to emerge. I like to think that the lost dreams we buried under the willow tree found their lifetime in the willow. The willows were a natural painkiller for the land, the cows, and me. I see now that I was living in communication with the land; my neglected internal landscape mirrored the disregard for the natural landscape.

Perhaps the phenomenon of trees that appear in the art of women recovering from miscarriage is part of the eco-heroine's call to life. Nevertheless, understanding the uniqueness of tree symbolism as significant to miscarriage might illuminate new approaches to ambiguous grief that reenvision rituals as pertinent to our times. And in line with the eco-heroine, personal stories placed in nature could help reroot us during fertility adversity. As ecopsychologist Linda Buzzell explains, to "be healthy and happy, we need to be embedded in and bond deeply with our human tribe, our animal and plant neighbors, and our place" (51).

At a time when we have forgotten many of our ancient rituals, reverie in nature could provide the humble container for transpersonal experience,

where our identity suddenly feels part of something much bigger than us. The eco-heroine's reciprocal relationship with nature offers personal and collective growth, and coupled with ecopsychology, it might offer an opportunity for healthy shadow integration by joining our dream images to the planet's wonder and distress.

Bringing Ecology and Reverie to a Developing Participatory Arts Practice

Benig Mauger explains that "Transformation starts in the heart of the wound ... it is the wounded healer who heals the wound" (141). Thinking of the wounded healer as an eco-heroine, Blackie describes a heroine as someone who returns from a long, dark, and difficult journey, which provides deep introspection, humility, newly birthed wisdom, and hard-won gifts. In the spirit of healing, the job of the heroine is to pass on these gifts in service to her community. Explaining the traits of the eco-heroine archetype, Blackie shares, "Her gifts are the gifts of the land to which she completely belongs; her voice is the voice of the Otherworld which echoes from the depths of the wells" (278).

Practising reverie in nature led me to develop the accessible craft of papermaking (as shown in Figure 4), a process that could be applied in a community setting, where paper could be made, written on, kept, or planted by those struggling with miscarriage. Despite being in my infancy with the papermaking process, I have noticed many therapeutic aspects. Aligned with the eco-heroine who faces the elements and nurtures the environment, making paper out of recycled materials seems a healthy remedy to consumerism, technology, and left-brain dominance by working in relationship with the land.

Working with a bucket, jug, and ladle feels like an age-old custom linked to the wisdom of cauldrons and kettles in myth, but it also stands out as an accessible ritual for community arts settings. The process recognizes that while women want to acknowledge their loss, they do not always want to speak about their pregnancy trauma. As such, reciprocal papermaking offers a tactile platform to create freely from conceptions of elite art while ingraining feminine stories in the landscape through native tree planting.



Figure 4. *Life and Death*, papermaking in progress. (Author's image, 2025)

Miscarriage as a Cultural Complex

Being labelled a failed or bad mother may be one of the most stigmatising and shaming attacks on a woman.

—Bridget Grant 211

In writing to restore women's autonomy in birth, Mauger explains that a woman's unconscious is a storehouse of myths regarding pregnancy and labor that have been inherited by her mother, family, and ancestors. Both conscious and unconscious concepts of motherhood, together with the fetal footprints of her own birth, affect how a woman adjusts to motherhood. But what happens when our severely ingrained assumptions and predictions for fertility, birth, and miscarriage are not met? What happens when our profound personal accounts encompassing these complexes are repressed?

Health researcher and cofounder of the Irish Birth Movement, Su Hushcke reports that the existing perinatal mental health services in Ireland are generally inadequate, as they focus on quantitative approaches and a medicalization of perinatal mental health, resulting in an absence of women's voices. Meanwhile, the *UK and Ireland Confidential Enquiry into Maternal Deaths and Morbidity* (Knight et al.) discovered that the leading cause of

maternal death in Ireland is suicide. In a literature review by maternal health researcher Natalene Séjourné and colleagues, they note women's dissatisfaction with the lack of psychological support following miscarriage from health professionals, stressing that "lack of emotional support, sensitivity, structure, and information" (404) was critical to their traumatic experiences. Fertility counsellor Rayna Markin, with fellow researcher and psychologist Sigal Zilcha-Mano (20–21), discovered that societies stigmatize and isolate women who have experienced miscarriage, preventing them from being able to heal, transform, and live with their grief. Art therapist Laura Seftel explains that pregnancy loss "is a unique and complex form of loss, as there is no physical body to bury and grieve" (39). As such, there are typically no public gatherings or social practices to acknowledge the often life-changing event and support women during this time.

Psychotherapist Joan Raphael-Leff explains that for pregnant women, dreams are experienced as visions in connection with the baby in utero (18–19), and obstetrics professor Irving G. Leon describes pregnancy loss as the shedding of dreams about "one who could have been but never was" (35). To improve support for grieving women, Laura Seftel calls for a "systematic review of symbolic imagery that emerges following pregnancy loss 'to help witness' and validate their experience" (37). Highlighting the demand for more holistic reproductive approaches, Markin and Zilcha-Mano found that to decrease the rates of depression, poor mental health, suicidal thoughts, and numerous psychophysical problems caused by the mental and physical trauma of miscarriage in the Western medicalized setting, women's stories of miscarriage need to be shared in a supportive space. Could this space be the reimagining and reintroduction of miscarriage rituals in popular culture?

Psychologist and artist Denise McMorow presents an innovative method, involving image-based responses to women's testimonies of miscarriage. Participants share that the images McMorow created through drawing resonated with their experiences of miscarriage, depicting the unspeakable emotions that they could not articulate. Proving the need for artistic complementary methods, midwifery and medical researcher, Masumeh Zahmatkesh et al. report that art therapy can improve quality of life after miscarriage. Although there is limited peer-reviewed literature on art therapy and eco-arts therapy as a singular healing modality for miscarriage trauma, miscarriage and expressive arts research by Amanda McKernan (2020) highlights that writing, music, movement, and visual arts help address the complicated feelings related to miscarriage, whereas medical researcher Adina Smith et al. have found that art-based teaching for doctors cultivates empathy towards the multitude of complex emotions experienced following miscarriage. Mauger affirms that hyper dependence on medicalization, in opposition to holistic approaches to women's reproductive health, creates the narrative that

life is something to be anesthetized, that we are unfit to endure the bruises life brings and, tragically, that no one else will be capable of containing our pain when we are defenceless.

When a mother cannot mourn a loss, the thought of moving on can feel hopeless. Ambiguous, hidden anguish is carried in the womb of her psyche, making it seem impossible to dream again. A nurturing place to mourn is critical for the strength to rebuild. The elimination of ritual has assailed the hinterlands of our hearts, bodies, and minds, synonymously with our planet, leaving mothers and Mother Nature overwhelmed. Psychologist James Hillman claims, "In place of ritual and taboo, we are given commandments; in place of ancestor spirits, personal parents" (158), subsequently creating a modernized maternal expectation that is too large for the psyche to maintain.

But what happens if we cannot live up to this maternal expectation? What if becoming a godlike parent is getting harder, if not impossible? What does this do to our souls, and what are we willing to do to make meaning of our lives? In *The Serpent and the Goddess*, Mary Condren speaks about the "myth of objectivity," which "serves to conceal the hidden agenda of those in power" (xxiii). Regarding reproductive technology, Condren reminds us: "The moral questions are usually only raised, if at all, after the fact" (xxiii).

If reproductive technology advances before our wisdom, what will be the outcome? Will these technologies be attainable, and if not, will they make our ability to mourn even worse? Importantly, might eradicating nature's shadow inform a new darkness? In *Gaia, Psyche, and Deep Ecology*, Andrew Fellows writes: "Transhumanism appears to extrapolate our separation from Gaia and exacerbate our disenchantment to a degree I could never have imagined and, as far as I can tell, altogether ignores ... the vast majority of humanity who cannot have, or do not want, such a future" (164). Evidence suggests that to support grieving mothers and decrease the rates of depression, suicidal thoughts, and numerous psycho-physical problems caused by the mental and physical trauma of miscarriage, women's accounts of miscarriage need to be shared.

The unifying narrative through women's stories of miscarriage is the loss of a dream and a dismemberment of the self, environment, and community. Thankfully, the goal of the eco-heroine is to reconnect to the self, environment, and community through facing our darkest times and integrating our shadow for personal transformation and myth. Supporting this idea, the author of *Art Therapy and Pregnancy Loss*, Laura Seftel, shares, "A renewed sense of wholeness or integration is possible—but only if it takes into account that which has been lost or broken" (37).

In support of the eco-heroine who fosters imagination in the domestic and creativity for the community, with evidence in support of art and ritual for miscarriage in mind, could socially engaged art and participatory eco-art

align with the eco-heroine to reenvision our approach to changing the onerous and diminutive myths of motherhood?



Figure 5. *Shadow to Place*, reconnecting to the land after miscarriage (Author's image, 2022)

Cultural Complex to Participatory Eco-Arts as Therapeutic

Art therapist Bridget Grant shares that nonverbal processes can offer a way to heal fractured feelings of “maternal failure” (211). Socially engaged, participatory arts surrounding fertility, birth, and loss might be a useful tool for miscarriage, but such practices are commonly restricted to individual psychotherapy, hindering insight into the collective psyche as a whole.

Corresponding with the eco-heroine and participatory eco-arts, could ancient sites in the Celtic world, whose folklore is embedded in fertility and healing, help mothers today? Irish psychotherapist Marion Dunlea explains that activating the right brain hemisphere through orienting to the outside allows us to “receive new information and make new connections” (8), highlighting time in nature as useful to therapeutic practices for miscarriage.

An example of nature-based creative practices in a community setting for individual and group healing is a sixteen-acre woodland in County Clare, Ireland, called *The Forest That Won't Forget*, which honors women wrongly diagnosed in cervical checks. In this initiative, funded by the Government of Ireland, artists and participants alike command a spiritual mapping of loss through nature and creativity for future generations. Raphael Leff explains

that during pregnancy, women tend to question “one’s place in the natural cycle of life and death” (18). Perhaps helping women process the unfinished, introspective journey of pregnancy using ecopsychological approaches and eco-arts as a source of complementarity, like *The Forest That Won’t Forget*, may be an ethical principle for miscarriage recovery and an example of holistic applications for reproductive health in clinical and community settings.



Figure 6. *Empty Nest* (Claire Flahavan, 2021). An example of the circumambulating nature of eco-arts from art therapy participants.

Much like the ever-evolving eco-heroine journey, Seftel writes that choosing open-ended art processes (as shown in Figure 6) is a recurring pattern in participants longing to express their experience of loss through art (34). Artist and grieving mother Stephanie Paige Cole—encapsulated the fluid form of artmaking for healing following loss: “I can’t even explain how good it feels to release those toxic feelings from my body and spread them all over the canvas” (qtd. in Seftel 34).

Relating this to my exploration of creative practice, eco-arts may add another dimension to artistic expression following pregnancy loss by reflecting the dark messiness of nature, which is in line with the eco-heroine, who meets the unknown with openness and resilience. Papermaking may provide an accessible container for those intimidated by the notion of conventional art by removing technical and written barriers that exclude women yearning to

express their pain. More profoundly, these eco-art materials foster agency restoration in grieving mothers, who can choose to hold onto their eco-art or give it back to nature in a cyclical ritual. Psychoanalyst Marion Dunlea is “interested in the connection between the inner landscape of the psyche and the geography of some of the megalithic sites in Ireland” (11) (illustrated by my personal experience of this, as shown in Figure 7). Participating in eco-arts and reverie in nature may reconnect us to ancient mythologies, which can be useful guides for difficult life transitions if reimagined for our times and may plausibly exist in a clinical and community setting. Building on the opportunities for healing through eco-arts and nature’s connection to myth led me to evaluate the framework of the eco-heroine as valuable to developing practices and rituals for miscarriage.



Figure 7. Ardgroom Stone Circle, Kerry (Author’s own, 2023)

The Eco-Heroine Path and Its Offering for Miscarriage

Campbell’s work has examined Western perceptions of the myth as mainly being concerned with the hero’s journey, which usually focusses on hierarchical quests through patriarchal right-brain rationalism and masculine efforts, which often encompass acts of war, rape, terror, and killing.

In this model, male archetypes, such as the sage, trickster, and smith, are subjugated, as well as the feminine. The nuance of local myths, having sprung from specific features in the land, is conflated into one mass, which historically

denigrates goddess belief and leaves us with a simplistic, patriarchal set of rules by which to live. But life, in particular the initiations of childbirth and miscarriage, is not linear and has little place in the hero's myth. Like the petals of the lotus flower in Buddhist belief, women experiencing childbirth and miscarriage rise from the water to bloom before withering and falling back to the water, where the seeds of the next lotus might swim. In miscarriage, where there is often nothing physical to mourn, opening ourselves to the cycles and hardships of nature could offer pathways to healing. For this reason, the eco-heroine model may offer a more resilient structure. Intuition, compassion, emotional intelligence, and grace signify the eco-heroine model and should not be mistaken for passivity. Strength, resilience, and protection play a part, too, but not through violence.

The eco-heroine model is not linear but circular, where a quest for wholeness is continuous and ever-growing through participation mystique and the lessons it offers us. Birth and miscarriage trauma cannot be conquered or fixed; rather, they are woven into a tapestry as a story for those who follow in our footsteps. In his seminal work on the hero's journey, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell argues that women in mythology encapsulate the all-knowing. The point of the hero's quest is to gain this knowledge. But this has little relevance for women experiencing fertility, birth, and miscarriage trauma today, where patriarchal overmedicalized practices have violated women's experience in the name of medical progress and the catch-all ultimatum of saving lives, which shames women into feeling grateful even when they have felt desecrated. Women's experiences of obstetric violence and uninformed consent in the medical sphere seem fortuitously in line with Campbell's oversight of the rape and sexualization of the feminine in amalgamated mythology, such as the abduction of the daughter of Demeter (goddess of childbirth and fertility) or the hounding persecution of the mother of Artemis (goddess of wilderness and fertility). Blackie builds on Maureen Murdock's heroine's journey by discussing the eco-heroine as a call to create a new journey that "leads us back to our own sense of grounded belonging to this Earth and asks us what we have to offer to the places and communities in which we live" (*If Women* 382).

In Ireland, in March 2024, reporters and politicians were shocked when a proposal to change the constitution, specifically regarding language around the role of mothers in the home, was not voted for by 67 per cent of voters. Some news coverage insisted that the public had not been made aware of the vote, resulting in low voter turnout. On the other hand, perhaps this turnout demonstrated a social feminine astuteness that understands that changing words in patriarchal institutions to sound progressive tacitly encourages women to take yet another hero's journey. Perhaps women in Ireland spotted patterns of oppressive behaviour behind the vote and understand all too well

that true change starts in valuing the role of women and mothers in the first place, whether they have children or not. This is a potent message, one perhaps fueled by the history of the Magdalene laundries and the rise in matriarchal goddess appreciation as evidenced in the new public holiday for St. Brigit.

While the hero's journey may serve some in adolescence, by focusing on ego development and individualism, it is unhelpful to life as a whole, where facing obstacles and weaving our struggles into the web of life experience are integral to transformation, health, and soul retrieval. For many women, miscarriage is a profound voyage into midlife. In this chaos and trauma, the eco-heroine journey can support women and their families to find their unique calling in the community.

The eco-heroine model embraces the mystery of our planet, in contrast to Campbell's focus on the mystery of man. The eco-heroine is taken on a feminine descent into the eco-cosmological and the underworld. Here, in the dense, claggy rot of the undergrowth, where hubris has no place, we meet our shadow, the aspect of ourselves or lived experience that is hardest to face. Through this humility and surrender, we open our souls to the power and awe of nature, and through this awareness, we can meet our enemies with embodied knowing and, most precious, ourselves with forgiveness and love.

When my son was two, we sat together making collages out of newspaper and magazine cuttings (as shown in Figure 8). He randomly chose four words for his picture. The words were "Define tomorrow with love."

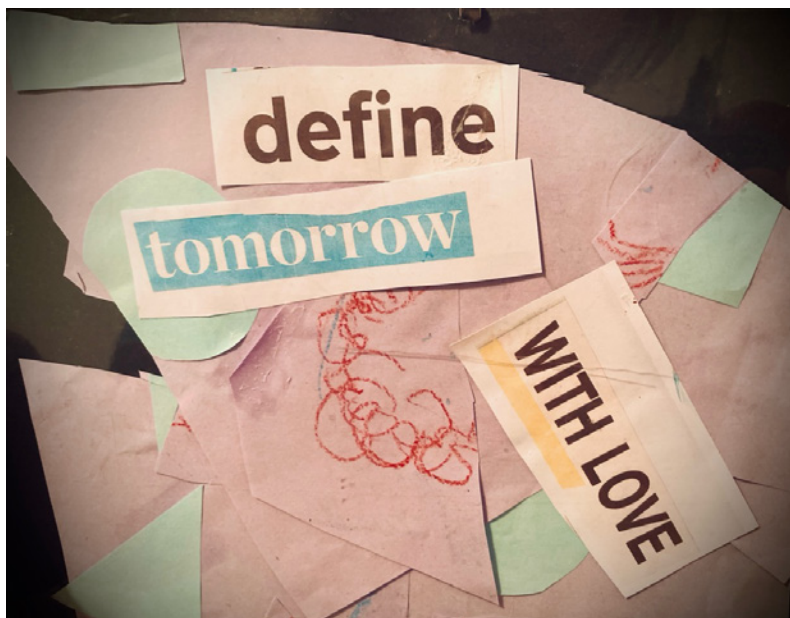


Figure 8. *Define Tomorrow with Love* (Enda Flannery, 2020)

Love, starting with self-love, whether we have children or not, and in turn love for our planet, is perhaps the only lasting way to make positive changes in the way we treat Earth. In the essay *Thinking Like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings*, ecopsychologist Arne Naess shares Gandhi's mothering analogy for eco-philosophy and environmental ethics: "There is nothing more conducive to giving a child the experience of what love, joy, and happiness are than being loved by a mother who loves herself" (35). Not only can we learn to mother ourselves, but we can also connect to those around us. As psychoanalyst Clarissa Pinkola Estes writes: 'You are born to one mother, but if you are lucky, you will have more than one. And among them all you will find most of what you need' (132).

To support the planet by discovering our ecological self, society might address our ethical shortcomings through community therapy as opposed to community science. Focusing on community therapeutics for grieving mothers following the trials of invasive fertility treatment, medicalized birth trauma, and lack of spiritual recognition in miscarriage, eco-heroine rituals and reimagined myths could be used as a watercourse for renewal and resilience on the journey of modern motherhood.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a therapeutic practice that combines reverie in nature alongside participatory eco-arts could be of value to women in contemporary Ireland living with miscarriage trauma. Cultivated by an eco-heroine mindset, creative and soulful approaches to miscarriage that honour women's stories of complicated loss might foster a healthier community for us all. As Blackie argues: "In these times it's not enough to awaken ourselves, to find our community. The world is in need of restoration, and each one of us is challenged to do the work of collective change. The day of the Heroic Quest is over.... The journey we need now ... is a journey of collective re-enchantment—a re-animation of the Earth" (*If Women* 375).



Figure 9. *Tending Within* (Author's image, 2024)

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The Termination of Parental Rights in Brazil from the Perspective of Matricentric Feminism

This article examines the process of terminating parental rights in Brazil, contrasting its legal foundation with its practical application, which disproportionately affects low-income families—particularly poor, Black single mothers. Matricentric feminism is presented as a theoretical and political framework for understanding the historical subjugation of mothers and for interrogating how labels such as “transgressive mother” are applied by sociolegal actors in practices and discourses to reinforce an exclusionary maternal ideal. The article reveals that the reasons for placing children and adolescents in state care are often interpreted in ways that blame and stigmatize mothers, ignoring their social vulnerability and the lack of effective public policies. This interpretation is influenced by idealized social constructions of motherhood and by power discourses that penalize any deviation from the normative model, thereby perpetuating social inequalities.

Introduction

Researcher: When you think about your children today? What do you feel?

Kauane [pseudonym]: I want them back. That’s why I am doing everything that I am doing. That’s why I asked for shelter. That’s why I’m getting treatment. That’s why I am going after everything they tell me to do. I do it. I am accepting the help. I am behaving myself in the house. I am doing this. I am going after the dentist, Pap smear, blood test, CREAS [specialized reference centre for social assistance, acronym in Portuguese]. It was the judge. Everything that I do, everything, goes to the judge. So I am following all the rules because my desire is to have them back, and I will have them because I have faith in God.¹

The opening epigraph reveals a mother's attempt to conform to regulatory mechanisms after being labelled as negligent and a violator of her children's rights. This is an excerpt from an interview conducted as part of my doctoral research in Brazil, in which I document, through fieldwork, the practices and discourses of the various agents involved in the network responsible for the social and legal processes of terminating parental rights.

Under Brazilian law, the termination of parental rights is defined as an exceptional measure applied in cases of failure to comply with inherent parental duties towards minor children, once all options for protection and intervention to keep the child or adolescent with their family of origin have been exhausted. In other words, it occurs when parents are deprived of the prerogatives that constitute their parental authority (Caminha).

However, there are significant gaps between the formal legal definition and practical reality. What becomes of motherhood for women who are judicially stripped of their role as mothers and lose custody of their children through the actions of state and societal agents? We know little about what it means to be a mother (O'Reilly and Green) and still less about what it is like to lose that role, to be prevented from exercising it, and how violent the processes are that lead a woman to be deprived of it. A deeper understanding of these experiences is crucial to humanizing lives that are often rendered invisible by institutions.

This article reflects on the oppression of mothers in situations of social fragility who have been separated from their children. These women are framed as violators of their children's rights and have their ability to exercise motherhood judicially curtailed. Using a qualitative, ethnographic method, this research also included a literature review, fieldwork, interviews, and data analysis. The project was submitted to and approved by the Research Ethics Committee (CEP/CONEP, acronym in Portuguese) via the Plataforma Brasil.

This article explores the following questions. Why does this form of punishment fall predominantly on mothers and not on men, who often evade their responsibilities in raising children? What actions and discourses criminalize and punish dissonant motherhood? Why are alternative, constructive paths towards maintaining ties with the family of origin discouraged?

To answer these questions, this article is divided into five sections: 1) The Legal Context of the Termination of Parental Rights and a Dialogue with Academic Research; 2) The Theoretical-Methodological Framework of Matricentric Feminism; 3) Social Formation and Inequalities in Brazil; 4) Methodological Paths; and 5) Concluding Remarks.

1. The Legal Context of the Termination of Parental Rights and a Dialogue with Academic Research

The institutional removal of children from their family environment by the state manifests in different forms in Brazil and around the world. International declarations have sought to curb such practices and establish minimum standards of protection, such as the *Declaration of the Rights of the Child*, which states: “A child of tender years shall not, save in exceptional circumstances, be separated from his mother. Society and the public authorities shall have the duty to extend particular care to children without a family and to those without adequate means of support. Payment of State and other assistance toward the maintenance of children of large families is desirable” (United Nations).

This declaration was a document of principles, succeeded by the 1989 *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, an international treaty with the force of law for the countries that ratified it, including Brazil (Brasil, Decreto nº 99.710). These norms affected national legislation in Brazil. The Federal Constitution of 1988 (Brasil, Constituição) recognizes in Article 226 that the family “is the foundation of society and has special protection from the Brazilian State.” Similarly, according to Article 4 of the Child and Adolescent Statute, family life is a right (Brasil, Lei Federal nº 8.069).

The same law states in Article 19 that it is in the “best interest of the child” to remain with their birth family. This statement highlights the responsibility of public authorities and the interprofessional team overseeing each case to exhaust all possibilities to preserve family ties, treating placement in a substitute family as a strictly exceptional measure (Brasil, Lei Federal nº 8.069). Thus, Brazilian legislation stipulates the rights the state must guarantee to protect families, particularly children and women, recognizing their specific needs within the scope of human rights.

If a violation of a child’s rights is confirmed, the judiciary can invoke protective measures for their protection. Among the nine applicable protective measures, three involve separation from the family of origin: institutional sheltering, family sheltering, and placement in a substitute family. However, the legislation establishes in Article 23 that the lack or scarcity of material resources shall not constitute sufficient grounds for the loss or suspension of parental rights (Brasil, Lei Federal nº 8.069).

According to the Brazilian Civil Code, in Article 1,637, the judicial suspension of parental rights is permitted in response to abuse by a parental authority or guardian negligence. This measure, which can consequently lead to termination, should be implemented with support services for the parents, as the law’s primary goal is the child’s reintegration into their family. The termination of parental rights is a severe measure in response to a situation

that violates a child's rights (Brasil, Lei Federal nº 10.406).

In 2022, the National Council of Justice (CNJ, acronym in Portuguese) published the results of its quantitative and qualitative research concerning the termination of parental rights and the adoption of children. The research acknowledges that available statistics on the phenomenon of termination have considerable limitations, as the implementation of the unified information registration system only dates to 2016. Data that came from previous systems lacked the level of detail required by the current system; it was fragmented and nonstandardized. Each court or district recorded information in its own way, making any comparative analysis or the creation of a reliable national diagnosis impossible. Even under these conditions, the report revealed that nearly 27,500 children were included in the National Adoption and Sheltering System (SNA, acronym in Portuguese) due to being involved in the termination of parental rights processes (CNJ).

Today, the reliability of these numbers fundamentally depends on the input of accurate information by courts across the country at each stage of the process, from the child's placement in a shelter to the termination sentence and subsequent inclusion for adoption. To this end, the CNJ has been enforcing the standardization of the information flow, ensuring that the registration of a termination of parental rights in any district follows the same parameters. However, weaknesses persist; control over procedural deadlines for termination and the length of time children spend in shelters, for example, is only possible through systematic analysis of the collected data. Monitoring them is central to the policy of guaranteeing the right to family and community life.

The qualitative research of the report covers districts from all five regions of Brazil, totalling 143 interviews, and captures the impressions and practices of each agent in the justice system and other bodies, according to their area of expertise and experience. The results reveal how the moral values and individual convictions of these professionals defined the scope of state initiatives aimed at managing the lives of children between birth and six years of age (CNJ).

According to the research, the justifications for terminations involve the agents' worldviews and idealized standards of conduct within the rights-guarantee system, including moralizing conceptions that indiscriminately label families and mothers as negligent. Furthermore, they reveal the imprecision of these agents, showing the difficulty magistrates and other professionals have in assessing whether the situation presented to them in the process involves severe abuse and parental negligence or if the family is in a situation of social vulnerability (CNJ). This is a topic with several layers of complexity. Various researchers have investigated Termination cases in the country, and they have identified the selectivity of these processes against certain families, especially women in situations of social vulnerability, whose basic rights were also violated, just like those of their children.

The reflections presented here build on the work of Simone Becker, Daniele Santa Barbara, Isabela Nadal, Janaína Gomes, Andrea de Souza, Ellen Pereira, and Mariana Schorn, just a few of the scholars who have contributed to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the processes of terminating parental rights in Brazil. These studies, conducted in different Brazilian states, present a critical and convergent analysis of how the termination of parental rights is a measure that disproportionately affects women in situations of vulnerability—mostly poor and Black—blaming them individually for the state’s structural failings. Mariana da Costa Schorn demonstrates that poverty is the cause behind most termination cases, but it is frequently masked in legal discourse by terms like “negligence” or by the construction of a “judicial truth” (Becker) that ignores the families’ social context. In her thesis, Simone Becker critiques the concept of “judicial truth,” arguing that it is not an objective fact to be discovered, but rather a social and ritualistic construct produced by power relations that emerges at the conclusion of a legal process. She defines this truth as the winning version in a dispute.

Daniele Santa Bárbara describes the system as paradoxical, noting that the same state that fails to provide support policies acts in a punitive and controlling manner. Previous studies have denounced that this process reproduces exclusionary and discriminatory logic, treating the motherhood of marginalized women as incapable and transforming termination into a tool of social control (Gomes; Pereira; Souza).

The Theoretical and Methodological Framework of Matricentric Feminism

Matricentric feminism (O’Reilly and Green) has uncovered and revealed the historical realities of the subjugation of mothers’ social position through practices—such as the sterilization of women and high rates of maternal mortality, especially among racialized women—which determine how women are permitted or forbidden to become mothers. This past is not over, however; it constantly reasserts itself. Collective practices and discourses take on contemporary forms but remain supported by patriarchal ideology, now articulated in new terms.

The way Adrienne Rich, in her classic *Of Woman Born*, discusses the veiled and explicit violence of institutionalized motherhood is provocative. Rich presents the case of Joanne Michulski, a thirty-eight-year-old mother suffering from mental distress and overburdened with the care of eight children, who was convicted of murdering the two youngest. Rich uses this crime, which surprised her husband and community—both enveloped in patriarchal logic and its privileges—to launch a critical and assertive historical examination of the illness-inducing conditions in which women have performed the maternal

role. Instead of finding support, mothers face profound indifference and violence in a society programmed to overwhelm them. Rich contributes to understanding and problematizing this situation by identifying motherhood as a patriarchal social institution. This institution extends far beyond social representations and is concretely constituted by laws, secular and religious.

In this sense, Rich helps us realize that throughout history, in both the most mundane and the most extraordinary circumstances, there are tensions surrounding motherhood as a patriarchal institution, which violates women's relationships and ways of life, silences them, and privileges the masculine perspective. Among its multiple forms of violence is the fact that patriarchal motherhood is an imposition—sometimes subtle, sometimes blatant—on women's lives (Rich).

As a way forward, Rich establishes the notion of mothering—a perspective that emphasizes experiences by and for mothers. It is understood as the lived experience of mothering and of real, everyday practices, revealing its inherent contradictions and calling for a redefinition of motherhood that empowers women and recognizes the totality of their experiences.

In this vein, Valerie Walkerdine and Helen Lucey, in their essay “It’s Only Natural,” also problematize scientific facts that have been consolidated as truth to reveal them as narratives. The authors show how these facts are socially, politically, and historically constructed with regulatory and oppressive effects on the lives of women and mothers, especially when contrasting the experiences of women from different social classes—to which we add ethnicities and races, geographical location, marital status, appearance, ability, religion, and many other social markers of difference (Saggese et al.). By adjusting this critical lens to analyze cases of mothers who lose custody of their children in court, we highlight how the narratives of motherhood, disguised as scientific and natural truths, also influence judicial decisions. These narratives carry specific expectations about the behaviour and role of mothers, perpetuating gender, class, and racial inequalities in the lives of women who lack social guarantees for their basic rights.

Regarding the maternal ideal and the characteristics that a so-called good mother must exhibit, Andrea O’Reilly discusses the ideals a mother must fulfill to avoid being labelled a “bad mother”: essentialization, privatization, individualization, naturalization, normalization, idealization, biologization, expertization, intensification, and depoliticization. A mother who deviates from any of these ideals is considered bad.

To unmask the institution of patriarchal motherhood, it is essential to recognize and embrace the complexity of the maternal experience. As Sarah Lachance Adams argues in “Maternal Ambivalence,” instead of pursuing the unattainable ideal of the perfect mother, embracing the contradictory attitudes and feelings inherent in childrearing has constructive potential. It allows for

the recognition of the distinct needs, desires, and perspectives of the mother and the children (Adams).

On the totality of the mothering experience, O'Reilly also discusses the importance of recognizing and vocalizing maternal regret, noting its enormous potential to deconstruct the mandates of compulsory motherhood, which are based on the prerogatives of essentialization, naturalization, and idealization. These frameworks combine to a need for self-knowledge and self-indulgence in the face of the eventual guilt that the maternal institution imposes (Adams; O'Reilly, "Maternal Regret").

A mother who strays from the maternal ideal produces the weapons used against her. She begins to face accusations of being incapable of caring for her children and even being threatening. In a judicial context, this subjectification manifests in arguments that also disqualify her maternal capacity—and in various ways, agents of the state and society manipulate this image of deviance from the maternal ideal.

A prime example of this ideological pressure is the popularization of the word "neglect." As Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels recall, during the world wars, women were strongly encouraged to enter the workforce and occupied a wide variety of positions. At the end of the conflict, these same women were encouraged to return to their kitchens and domestic routines. At that moment, an ideological campaign, both fierce and subtle, was established to redomesticate women through motherhood, and it was then that the term "neglect" rose to common use in the Western vocabulary. This process occurred concurrently with, and in reinforcement of, the ideals of intensive motherhood, which were established in the mid-1970s and 1980s to consolidate this redomestication of women, including by curtailing the achievements of the feminist movement (Douglas and Michaels).

Since then, society has cultivated—though not without criticism and resistance—a growing emphasis on the wellbeing, development, and safety of children, which requires the figure of a mother who is altruistic, dedicated, and devoted to her children (Douglas and Michaels). Within this logic, since the 1980s, "motherhood has become a psychological police state" (Douglas and Michaels 341), a phrase that captures the intensity of the varied forms of daily and constant surveillance in an ideology that ensnares all who engage in maternal practices. The authors state that the central issue is not about which path women have chosen, what is considered right, or what is considered wrong. The question they pose, and with which my reflection engages, is the exercise of elucidating why a reactionary and normative ideology, dissonant with the lives of most women, continues to prevail and find fertile ground for serving as a basic support for discriminatory and oppressive practices (Douglas and Michaels). If these naturalized constructions of motherhood are not questioned, they inadvertently reinforce these stereotypes.

Adapting the Theory to Reflect on the Brazilian Reality

A matricentric feminist analysis shifts the focus to mother narratives, based on the premise that their rights must be guaranteed and on the need to expose the realities these mothers—especially those practicing dissident motherhoods—experience in their daily lives. According to Andrea O'Reilly and Fiona Green, matricentric feminism is committed to justice and social change; therefore, it considers motherhood a socially engaged endeavour and a locus of power.

In “Empowered and Feminist Mothering,” O'Reilly clarifies that her theory of empowered mothering is available to both marginalized and privileged women, and it also applies to all nonnormative mothers. By operating outside the norm, or even in opposition to it, these mothers, in their perceived social inadequacy, can demonstrate empowering ways of mothering. This reflection leads me to the theoretical-analytical exercise of bridging these theoretical contributions with my research. Women and mothers are exposed to countless situations of violence. When intersected with race, vulnerability, insecurity, and dehumanization become even more dramatic for poor, single, Black mothers. Simultaneously, patriarchal culture allows men to evade fatherhood with impunity and overburdens mothers with caregiving. My research field deals with these mechanisms of surveillance, especially among those practising deviant motherhoods, who are socially treated as negative examples of how mothers should not act. In other words, I examine how stereotypes of dissident mothers are exploited to emphasize what a so-called good mother must not do, seeking evidence to justify official reports without providing effective means to address the underlying reality.

Particularly within Brazil's network of social and legal actors, there are mechanisms of action and discourse, in a tangle of relationships, that hinder and even prevent women from exercising their mothering practices. This dynamic occurs because they are extremely distant from any possibility of achieving the maternal ideal. Structurally, they lack the real-world conditions to meet their children's demands exclusively and face multiple and repeated circumstances that affix the stigmatizing label (Goffman) of inadequacy upon them. Lorraine Greaves et al., for example, expose the complex and critical views conveyed by dominant social discourses. These discourses influence and shape public perception, state policies, and legal frameworks regarding mothers facing extreme adversity—that is, mothers under duress, such as those dealing with substance use, domestic violence, or mental health issues—and how they are portrayed through systemic biases that reinforce the pressures and oppression they face.

Social expectations, legal implications, and media representations have a direct impact on the judgment of these women's abilities to be effective mothers. Greaves et al. debate the tension between such discourses and the

rights and safety of the children and mothers involved, highlighting how policies often prioritize the child's wellbeing, potentially at the expense of supporting the mother-child relationship. Ultimately, they underscore the need for a more nuanced understanding of the interdependencies between their rights for the wellbeing of the woman and child and to strengthen this relationship.

In parallel, Michelle Hughes Miller examines the influence of experts in family law decisions, particularly how these experts evaluate mothers based on entrenched ideologies of motherhood. The overvaluation granted to these professionals in legal settings often marginalizes the mothers' own experiences and perceptions, effectively silencing their voices in critical decisions that affect their families. The author explores the criteria by which these experts are deemed credible by courts, the supposed objectivity with which they present their assessments, and the implications for judicial outcomes. In summary, Miller identifies that the courts' reliance on these expert opinions reflects and reinforces broader cultural assumptions about motherhood that can lead to biased and unjust legal decisions.

Although these studies focus on different regions and their specificities, a comparative analysis reveals several analogous dimensions. For instance, Luciana Braga, Alzira de Oliveira, and Jorge Mônica Pontes explore the conceptual fissures between motherhood as a patriarchal institution and the lived experience of motherhood, investigating how repeated violence occurs in the compulsory separation of mothers and children in situations of vulnerability in Belo Horizonte. They analyze legal provisions that authorize primary healthcare agents, maternity ward staff, and other legal agents to report women based on conditions of poverty, precarious housing, and dependency on alcohol and/or drugs. The women in these reports do not fit the socially conventional standard of a good mother. Based on the evidence used by these agents, the women are interpreted as a threat and a risk to the child's integrity—even while still pregnant, during prenatal exams, or in the immediate postpartum period (Braga; Jorge; Pontes).

In this work, Braga, Jorge, and Pontes reveal that the legal provisions supposedly intended to protect the wellbeing and dignity of newborns disregard the consequences of separation for both the mother and the child. By grounding legal measures that are weak in creating dialogue and alternative possibilities, they end up reinforcing processes of exclusion, prejudice, racism, sexism, vulnerability, and social injustice. The newborns are denied the possibility of living with their biological family, especially their mother, reinforcing a framework of stigmatization upon her (Braga; Jorge; Pontes).

The cases terminating parental rights, separating mothers and children, involve women who, despite being socially overburdened as the primary—if not sole—caregivers for their children, do not abdicate their role as mothers

but are systematically removed from it. Although their mothering practices over the children they bore have been terminated, these women do not cease to be mothers. This identity, which is neither fixed nor homogeneous (Hall), accompanies them throughout their lives, even though many flee from it to avoid pain and suffering. Nevertheless, memories of their children erupt at unforeseen moments throughout their lives, as the ethnographic data in this research captured.

Social Formation and Inequalities in Brazil

Brazilian society is marked by unequal power relations, violence, and intense cultural and phenotypic mixing, which was far from a harmonious encounter. Brazil's constitution is founded upon the hierarchical interaction of three fundamental matrices: the Indigenous peoples, the original inhabitants; the Portuguese colonizers, who imposed their political and economic project; and the African peoples, forcibly brought over under the regime of slavery (Schwarcz and Starling).

In "Casa-Grande & Senzala," Gilberto Freyre analyzes the genesis of this society from the perspective of the sugar plantation. He describes a patriarchal social organization centred on the figure of the plantation owner, whose authority extended over his family, dependents, and the enslaved population. Freyre argues that the physical proximity between the master's house (*casa-grande*) and the slave quarters (*senzala*) promoted intense cultural exchange and miscegenation that supposedly softened antagonisms, giving rise to the idea of a racial democracy. However, this view is widely criticized for romanticizing the extreme violence and power asymmetry that characterized slavery (Freyre).

In parallel, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, in "Raízes do Brasil" (Roots of Brazil), introduces the concept of the "cordial man." For him, Brazilian society was structured on the primacy of personal, emotional, and family relationships to the detriment of impersonal norms and the public sphere. The cordial man acts from the heart, blurring the public and private spheres and hindering the consolidation of a fully republican state bureaucracy. This trait, known as *patrimonialism*, explains the persistence of practices like nepotism and corruption (Holanda).

In "Formação do Brasil Contemporâneo" (The Formation of Contemporary Brazil), Caio Prado Júnior offers a fundamental economic perspective. He argues that Brazil was forged not as a nation with its own internal project but as an exploitative colony whose very meaning or purpose was to supply products for the European market. This external orientation consolidated a structure based on large, landed estates (*latifúndios*), monoculture, and slave labour, generating a profound and lasting social inequality that has become

one of the country's structural features (Prado Júnior).

The abolition of slavery in 1888 was also incomplete. The Black population was freed but left without access to land, education, or any form of reparation. They were marginalized in a competitive capitalist society that, simultaneously, encouraged European immigration to replace them in the labour market. Thus, racial prejudice did not disappear but was reconfigured, perpetuating inequality under the veil of the myth of racial democracy (Fernandes). Unlike the classic European model, such as the French Revolution, where the bourgeoisie destroyed the old aristocratic order to create a democratic and liberal society, Brazil's national bourgeoisie developed in a dependent relationship with international capital and in alliance with the old agrarian elites. Consequently, Brazil's capitalist modernization did not lead to democracy but to a model of dependent and autocratic capitalism. The result was a form of development that maintained and deepened social inequalities. The state became the primary instrument of this bourgeoisie, not to guarantee universal rights, but to ensure capital accumulation and contain popular pressures, often resorting to authoritarian regimes, such as the 1964 military dictatorship (Fernandes).

The primary challenges of contemporary Brazilian society are revealed as structural phenomena, deeply rooted in this historical and social formation. They are manifestations of a patriarchal system in constant interaction with racism and class inequality, which continues to organize power relations, institutions, and daily life. Throughout 2024, the Brazilian Forum on Public Safety (FBSP) registered 1,492 female victims of femicide, an average of four deaths per day, representing a 0.7 per cent increase from the previous year. Attempted femicides resulted in 3,870 victims, a considerable increase of 19 per cent compared to 2023. Of the femicide victims, a significant majority of 63.6 per cent were Black women. In 97 per cent of all cases, the murderers were men, with eight out of ten women killed by their partners or ex-partners (FBSP). Also in 2024, there were 51,866 recorded cases of psychological violence, 6.3 per cent more than in 2023. The number of threats reached 747,683. The military police registered 1,067,556 calls for domestic violence via the 190 emergency number, averaging two calls per minute. Data on rape show there were 87,545 victims, of whom 87.7 per cent were women, and of these, 55.6 per cent were Black (FBSP). Regarding the sexual division of labour, the burden of unpaid domestic work and care is a key indicator. Data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) show that in 2022, women dedicated an average of 21.4 hours per week to domestic tasks, while men dedicated only eleven hours (IBGE, *Estatísticas*). This "double shift" acts as a major obstacle to women's professional advancement, political participation, and time for leisure and rest.

In the economic sphere, gender inequality is persistent. The Continuous

National Household Sample Survey (Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios Contínua, or PNAD Contínua), released by the IBGE (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística), shows that in 2022, women earned, on average, 77.7 per cent of men's income. The labour force participation rate for women is also lower than for men (53.3 per cent for women versus 73.2 per cent for men), and the unemployment rate is consistently higher for women. According to the *Social Inequalities by Colour or Race Report* (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística - IBGE), this inequality is more pronounced for Black women, who earn, on average, 46 per cent of the salary of white men. The field of education also reveals a paradox. On average, Brazilian women have surpassed men in years of schooling, reaching 10.3 years in 2024, compared to 9.9 years for men, among the population aged twenty-five and over. Although the difference is slight, this rate consolidates recent trends of women pursuing more education. Women also constitute the majority of graduates from university programs in the country, according to the National Institute of Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira (INEP). However, despite these qualifications, such indicators do not translate into equal opportunities, wages, or occupation of leadership positions. Gender inequality is not the result of a supposed lack of preparation on the part of women but rather of discriminatory barriers within society.

Methodological Paths

The methodological steps for this article involved a literature review, fieldwork, interviews, and data analysis. Regarding the fieldwork, I initially wondered how I would gain access to these mothers and the professionals who, directly and indirectly, carry out the termination of parental rights. As a complex research subject situated within a network of various institutions and agencies, there were multiple possible points of entry into the field.

In response, I combined two of my commitments: the fieldwork for my ongoing doctoral thesis in sociology and the completion of the mandatory curricular internship for my second undergraduate degree in social work. This synergy was not merely a practical matter but a methodological distinction that added value to my field experience in the collection of ethnographic data and in my second academic training.

The first phase of the fieldwork occurred in Londrina, Paraná, Brazil, my hometown, from September to December 2023 and consisted of observations I conducted at a men's transitional shelter (MMA, acronym in Portuguese). This is an emergency, short-term institutional shelter for homeless men, allowing them to access basic, dignified living conditions while having their needs identified and being referred to other services. Among my observations, I noted the scarcity of mentions of family by the service users and, even rarer,

references to fatherhood as an element of their identity. This silence reveals the patriarchal norm of the absent or secondary father in processes involving the family and child (Bernardi). Generally, fatherhood was only discussed when a staff member briefly inquired about it with a sheltered user, suggesting that this family tie is not necessarily a foundational dimension of these men's self-perception.

My next research locus was the female population, which presented a different methodological challenge. Given the sensitive and personal nature of the research, which delved into topics such as their mothering experiences, this phase required building close ties from the outset to foster a strong foundation of trust. This approach allowed us to collaborate, relate, and coexist. The site was the "Missão Casa Verde" Women's Transitional and Welcoming House, an institution offering free, permanent services for women over eighteen. Its goal is to guarantee comprehensive protection in situations of helplessness, vulnerability, and personal and social risk, in addition to securing their fundamental rights. The house occasionally shelters mothers undergoing sociolegal proceedings for the suspension or termination of their parental rights.

I followed the daily routine of this institution between January and August 2024, during which time I was able to get closer to the various professionals working there and, most importantly, speak with mothers who became my research interlocutors. I recorded aspects related to observation and experiences in my field journal (Minayo).

The choice of open-ended interviews, also called "conversations with a purpose" (Minayo 264), was made because it is compatible with ethnographic research and does not limit the interlocutors' speech. Fifteen interviews of approximately one hour each were conducted with mothers and sociolegal professionals. Two of these were discarded because, though important for shaping the overall research landscape, they were not directly connected to the proposed theme. Thus, thirteen interviews were added to the empirical data: four mothers and nine sociolegal professional agents. These conversations resulted in twelve hours and sixteen minutes of recordings, in addition to the ethnographic data.

The selection of interviewees was guided by the snowball sampling technique, which is common in qualitative research. In this technique, strategic participants recommend other relevant, diverse participants to interview and so on (Lima). An essential criterion for participation was the willingness to discuss the topic. It was not intentional that all the people I spoke with were women; rather, it was a direct reflection of the gendered social structure organizing the field of investigation. The "feminization of care" phenomenon is strikingly evident in the social assistance context and the family justice system, where mothers are the primary subjects of state

intervention, and the professionals working on the front lines (e.g., social workers, psychologists, and child protective services counsellors) are also predominantly female (Santos de Jesus).

The invitation for the mothers to participate was made in person, and the interviews were conducted at Missão Casa Verde in a private workspace. For the other agents, the invitation was mostly sent via text message, and a time for the in-person interview was scheduled at their workplace, according to their preference. I always went to meet each of them.

The interaction with the participants was based on ethical principles and due respect for human dignity. At the beginning of each conversation, participants were presented with an informed consent form, guaranteeing their anonymity and confidentiality. A recorder was used to record the conversations, which allowed me to focus on the face-to-face interaction, using the field journal only to make some notes.

At the beginning of the dialogue, each participant provided their gender identity, age, race/colour, education level, occupation, marital status, and number of children. Next, I asked them to briefly tell their story and introduce themselves. We then moved on to talk about motherhood and, finally, about the paths that led to the termination of their parental rights. The interviews were later transcribed, and as the researcher, I am also responsible for safeguarding the digital files, which will be kept confidential for five years after the publication of the thesis.

For data analysis, the interviews were categorized according to my interlocutors' roles in the research, either as "mothers" or "agents," a distinction justified by the search for the matrifocality (O'Reilly and Green) of dissident motherhoods. The agents were differentiated by the institutions where they work or the positions they hold.

Empirical Results

This research included four dissident mothers: Kauane, Tainá, Maiara, and Iara.² Additionally, nine professionals involved in the processes of terminating parental rights were interviewed: Julia, Simone, Cecília, Emilia, Cassia, Sonia, Lucia, Rosana, and Madalena, as shown in Table 1. In the following section, each mother's situation is briefly contextualized within the various paths that led to the separation from their children. Subsequently, insights gathered from the state agents are presented thematically, using excerpts from their statements as illustrations.

	Pseudonym	Age	Race/Color	Children	Role Research	Education	Occupation
1	Kauane	about 30	Black	2	Mother	High school	Unemployed
2	Tainá	about 30	Black	4	Mother	High school	Unemployed
3	Iara	about 40	Black	3	Mother	Middle School	Unemployed
4	Maiara	about 30	Black	1	Mother	Middle School	Unemployed
5	Julia	47	White	2	Institutional Agent	Doctoral Degree	Social Worker
6	Simone	37	Black	1	Institutional Agent	Postgraduate Certificate	Guardian Counselor
7	Cecilia	57	White	2	Institutional Agent	Master's Degree	Guardian Counselor
8	Emília	39	White	2	Institutional Agent	Master's Degree	Psychologist
9	Cassia	56	White	2	Institutional Agent	Master's Degree	Social Worker
10	Sonia	36	Black	1	Institutional Agent	High school	General services
11	Lucia	27	White	0	Institutional Agent	Bachelor's Degree	Psychologist
12	Rosana	49	White	3	Institutional Agent	Bachelor's Degree	Judge
13	Madalena	45	White	2	Institutional Agent	Postgraduate Certificate	Judge

Table 1: Interviews Conducted. Author's elaboration 2024–2025.

Kauane's trajectory as a Black single mother is emblematic of the interaction between maternal agency and the rigidity of the sociolegal system. Her mothering manifests in her conscious decision to request institutional care for her children as a strategy of radical care, aiming for her own recovery so she could regain custody. Despite her explicit compliance with multiple judicial demands—treatment for chemical dependency, psychosocial support, health exams—her journey reveals the failures of a support system that operates in a homogenizing and punitive manner. The lack of individualized psychological support to deal with past traumas (e.g., rejection by her family of origin and domestic violence) and the application of a disproportionate sanction (e.g., removal from a shelter for being late) triggered her collapse, culminating in the termination of her parental rights and the internalization of a discourse of incapacity, which contradicts her initial fight, a fight driven by a profound affection for her children.

Tainá's case, in contrast, illustrates how the absence of a structured family nucleus and the search for belonging can generate complex relational dynamics that ultimately trigger state intervention. Having grown up in institutional care, her adult life is marked by a series of romantic (and sexual) choices within the same family web, culminating in a structure where her children are simultaneously siblings and cousins. She perceives the report that leads to the suspension of her parental rights as an act of revenge by a relative involved in this plot of betrayals and resentments. Substance use emerges not as the primary cause but as a response to the anger and pain of being separated from her children. Tainá's story exposes the fragility of bonds, the moral complexity of human decisions in contexts of deprivation, and the way private conflicts are adjudicated and penalized by the public sphere.

Maiara's life, also that of a Black woman, highlights the brutal intersection of gender-based violence, structural racism, and the precarity of life as determining factors in the termination of parental rights. The loss of custody of her son stems not from a process of continued negligence but from a single,

violent event in which she was the victim. The police intervention on that occasion penalized her vulnerability. The subsequent death of her mother and the refusal of support from her extended family annihilated her support network, plunging her into a spiral of extreme marginalization, including sex work and homelessness. Her motherhood persists in the realm of desire and memory, in the will to rectify the narrative of abandonment imposed upon her—a desire obstructed by the fear of her ex-partner and by the social and racial distance that now separates her from her son, who is being raised by an affluent white family.

Finally, Iara's story is marked by family secrets, an initial maternal rejection, and the use of patriarchal power as a tool of punishment, resulting in the successive loss of her children. The late discovery of her true parentage triggers an insubordinate posture in her, which is punished by the removal of her first child through an act of power by her father. This traumatic event establishes a pattern of separation and instability that repeats in her adult life. The loss of custody of her two younger children to her extended family is rationalized by her in retrospect as a protective choice—a discourse that merges the internalization of guilt with a pragmatic assessment of her circumstances. Her trajectory demonstrates how intergenerational traumas and family violence shape the material and subjective conditions for the practice of mothering, leading to a form of dissent that is largely a consequence of imposed ruptures.

Turning to the reflection on how terms like “negligence,” “the child's best interest,” and “abandonment” appear in the discourses of the agents, this study “brackets” these terms—that is, they are held up for analysis. This is not to question their validity but to problematize the field of symbolic forces they evoke, as they are not neutral words.

From the perspective of the agents who operationalize the processes of terminating parental rights, with whom I was able to speak and observe, the most frequent reasons that lead to children and adolescents being placed in institutional care are associated with parental negligence, abandonment, alcohol and drug dependence, and physical or psychological abuse, as illustrated in the statements of my interlocutors:

I think that mental health issues have increased a lot... and drug use issues, too.... So, yeah, mental health problems are actually what cause families to abandon their children and teenagers. (Rosana, a judge)

The reasons for losing parental rights are serious. We're talking about serious violence against a child or teen's physical and sexual wellbeing.... It's not rare to see cases where the mother's new partner sexually abuses a daughter, and sometimes, the mom knows about it and does nothing. There are also situations of neglect and

mistreatment... the child isn't going to school, doesn't have enough food, is lacking basic care. (Madalena, a judge)

Nowadays, a lot of cases are because of drug abuse. The abuse of drugs has caused so many situations where mothers end up losing custody, where the family loses their parental rights. (Simone, a guardianship counsellor)

One of the things that really stands out to me is the number of women dealing with alcoholism and drug addiction, which makes them, quote-unquote, irresponsible when it comes to caring for their kids. So they don't provide care, they don't protect them, they just abandon the little ones to fend for themselves. So you have kids with no care, no protection, who are left home alone while their mothers go out to drink or use drugs ... once we confirm there's neglect, that a child has been abandoned, or that the home is unstable, unsanitary, or dangerous, these parents end up losing their parental rights over their children. (Cecília, guardianship counsellor)

Sexual violence, physical violence, neglect, abandonment, educational neglect.... It's usually never just one thing, you know? There's always more than one issue going on.... We see a lot of cases that involve sexual, psychological, and physical violence, too" (Emilia, psychologist)

These factors must be understood within the context of extreme social vulnerability, which blames and punishes mothers. The circumstances involve women who are objectified and reduced to their reproductive function. They are expected to conceive, give birth, and raise children, and then deal alone with the systematic separation from them if they deviate from the socially established role of good mothers (O'Reilly, "Normative Motherhood"), reinforcing the stigmatizing label of "incapable" upon them.

This analysis does not seek to relativize maternal practices that may risk a child's wellbeing. Rather, its purpose is, from a sociological standpoint, to suspend judgment on the discourses and actions of the sociolegal agents involved in the termination of parental rights. This approach allows for an analysis of the mechanisms of classification and judgment that, while supposedly neutral and impartial, actually reiterate profound processes of exclusion.

Multiple social circumstances, not just a single factor, lead to the dissolution of a family unit. The results show that removing children from their families frequently occurs because poverty is treated as an individual failing. The issue manifests at all social levels, but families with fewer resources face the greatest exposure because other groups have alternatives, such as therapeutic support

or help from relatives, to face the same difficulties. This understanding is reflected in the words of Emília, a psychologist at the Childhood and Youth Court of Londrina:

You can see that pretty much everyone, the great majority, like, 99 per cent of the cases are from low-income families. It's super rare to get a different case, mostly because it doesn't even reach the justice system, you know? I'm talking about situations from middle and upper-class families, right? For example, I worked at CREAS for a long time, back when it exclusively dealt with families, kids, and teens with suspected sexual violence. We know there are cases in the wealthier neighbourhoods, but those cases don't reach public services. So, they get hushed up; they're taken to private professionals.... It's just rarer, like, for reports to be made, for it to get to that point.... Not that it doesn't happen.

Although the reasons that lead to the termination of parental rights are common in families of all social classes, society tends to blame and judge individuals according to a standard that considers financial status, gender identity, and ethnic origin, among other markers. It should be noted that the families who lose custody of their children—mostly single, poor, and Black mothers—have their lives judged by state bureaucracy through a moral lens that is different from and detached from their own social environment. This lens of judgment is aggravated by the hostility with which these mothers are treated, as exemplified by the testimony of Tainá upon appearing before the judge to respond to the suspension of her parental rights:

At the hearing, it was just me and him [her partner]. I was still with him back then, going through it all—the fighting, the drama—but we were still together, me and Lucas. Anyways, I went into the courtroom, and the judge just started yelling. She said so much, and I answered what I could. The thing is, if someone is rough with me, I just shut down. I get quiet. I start crying. And she was just so harsh, you know? Then she was like, “You’re still with this guy? Have you no shame?” It’s just... I know she’s there to judge, but I really don’t know if that’s the way you’re supposed to do it. I don’t understand

The way these agents speak and exercise control functions by inverting the perception of these mothers. Instead of being understood as individuals failed by the state and deprived of their rights, they are seen through a moral lens that defines them as guilty or bad mothers, which, in turn, justifies the violation of their legal protections and the systematic elimination of their mothering practices.

Frequently, the father is not mentioned in the court records, does not appear before the judge at hearings, and does not participate in the children's upbringing—not even with child support—and is not held accountable for this. Many children and adolescents do not even have their father's name on their birth certificate. Sonia, a general services employee at a children's shelter, speaks about the standard discourse on the father's absence:

A kid is always seen as more of the mom's than the dad's. A woman has a child, and even if she goes on to start another family, she never stops having that first kid. That child will always be hers. But for him [the father], it's like that child doesn't even exist, so he can start his new family. So he'll say, "I take great care of my kids with this woman," but what about the kid with the other one [the ex]? Just forget about them? And that's how the child, a lot of the time, ends up in a shelter because the excuse is always, "Well, the mom couldn't handle it."

The greater burden of these processes falls on the mother—often Black women, for whom a historical legacy of colonial and ethnic-racial exclusion exacerbates the oppression they face. Given the unequal conditions that women confront in a patriarchal, colonial, classist, racist, heteronormative, and ableist society, it is the mother who bears the social responsibilities, expectations, and demands related to maintaining the family, the reproduction of life, and childrearing (Akotirene; González).

The lack of effective public policies to support vulnerable families, such as those dealing with alcohol or drug addiction, directly undermines their ability to care for their children. The following excerpts, from Simone, a child protection counsellor in Londrina, point out glaring gaps in the support network, such as the scarcity of psychological care and of places for children to stay while their mothers work:

Today we don't have a city psychology service that handles situations that need psychological support. Mental health in our city is a huge problem right now, and we just don't have that kind of care. CAPS [Community Psychosocial Attention Center, acronym in Portuguese] is totally not enough. We were just talking about a kid who's on a waiting list to be seen two years from now. How can a kid who tried to commit suicide today only get help in two years? ... We also have this gap for kids from four to six years old, where there's nowhere for them to go. From six years old and up, we have after-school programs. But for the four- and five-year-olds, there's nothing. So, a single mom has to work part-time. But how are you supposed to support a family on a part-time job? You just can't.

This critique of inadequate social policies is a common point of convergence in the academic research on the termination of parental rights in Brazil. Tragically, even when love is present, these mothers are negatively affected by their failure to conform to the behavioural standards that the social order establishes and demands yet without offering effective material means of support. In this context, Julia, a social worker who closely followed Kauane's termination of parental rights case, participated in several meetings to coordinate referrals through the social protection network. She offers this assessment:

I think that the things I used to hear, you know, in those [work-related case] studies, in the very hearings I attended, are things that... it's not about being "Kauane"; it's about anyone. There are things you just shouldn't say about another human being. So, I saw a very biased, a really biased view of the situation. And then, I would talk a lot with Kauane herself about her situation. I always made her very aware of the difficulty of it all. She was very conscious of it. I'd say, "Kauane, they want this, this, and that from you." It was like, she had to start working. She had to go to CAPS every day. She had to do a whole list of things. And one slip-up from her was enough to put her desire and her will to have her kids back in check, her ability to have those kids back, that's what it was.

Thus, there is an overemphasis on the outcomes of terminating parental rights and subsequently placing children for adoption. In contrast, initiatives aimed at family reunification and preserving emotional bonds are devalued. This reality is reflected in the routine application of the suspension of parental rights and in the excessive number of institutional placements for children and adolescents. Such a tragic observation is evident in the following statement by Cassia, a social worker at the Childhood and Youth Court in Londrina: "There's this situation where, when kids are taken into care, the [social services] network just disappears. It should be the other way around, you know? That's exactly when the network needs to step in to strengthen the family and prepare them for the child's return. That's a real struggle we face."

In summary, the empirical findings demonstrate that the termination of parental rights, though legally justified, operates as a mechanism that selectively punishes dissonant forms of motherhood. The trajectories of Kauane, Tainá, Maiara, and Iara reveal that state intervention primarily targets women already affected by structural violence, such as poverty, racism, paternal absence, domestic violence, and substance abuse. As admitted by the system's own agents, this intervention is marked by a moralistic perspective that disregards the families' social context and is exacerbated by ineffective public support policies. By holding vulnerable mothers individually responsible

for collective and systemic failures, the termination process not only dissolves family bonds but also reinforces and perpetuates cycles of social, racial, and gender-based exclusion.

Concluding Remarks

Matricentric feminism urges us to develop a more militant, radical, direct, and defiant politics in our critique of patriarchal motherhood, which includes combating the burdens imposed on mothers, as well as their abandonment and blame. O'Reilly posits that childcare is intrinsically linked to maternal care ("Empowered"). Thus, if we are interested in providing the best for children, the most effective method is through laws and policies that support mothers and motherhood, beginning with ensuring their essential rights are met. A supported and valued mother is more likely to provide a healthy and stimulating environment for her child's development (Smith).

Matricentric feminism brings to the forefront the historical subjugation of mothers—marked by forced sterilization and high maternal mortality, especially among racialized women—which has influenced who is permitted to mother. This history is perpetuated in current discourses, such as the use of the term "negligence." By studying the trajectories of women who have been separated from their children, this article proposes the need for an epistemological and practical turn within Brazil's rights-guarantee system. Overcoming the cycle of criminalizing dissident motherhood and ensuring the comprehensive protection of children demand the development of a matricentric literacy among state agents—such as judges, prosecutors, public defenders, social workers, psychologists, and guardianship counsellors—as well as the promotion of public and private social policies across all sectors of human development.

The proposed matricentric literacy must transcend the mere notion of sensitivity training and establish a new framework for institutional interpretation and action. This framework is grounded in a shift from suspicion to structural understanding, which would move the judicial and technical focus away from individualized suspicion of the violating or negligent mother and towards a structural analysis of the material and symbolic conditions undermining the practice of motherhood. Implementing continuous training programs, workshops, and revising institutional protocols through the lens of matricentric feminism are concrete and urgent steps forward.

This article has briefly addressed the issue of the termination of parental rights in Brazil, highlighting the discrepancy between legislation defining it as an exceptional measure and the reality of its widespread use. The reflections gathered here clash with the way oppressive social structures predominantly affect low-income families—especially poor, Black single mothers—who have

historically suffered from exclusion under patriarchy, neoliberal capitalism, and colonialism.

Addressing this topic opens strategic possibilities for confronting the traps through which social institutions capture the daily lives of women and mothers. Whether in Rich's denunciatory reading of Michulski or in the daily reality of Kauane, the mother from the opening epigraph, there are many faces of the deliberate disrespect for women's lives. Even more specific is the blatant way these multiple forms of violence fall upon mothers, going as far as to label them mentally ill, condemn them in courts of law, or both.

Knowing women's stories and listening to their accounts of how they became mothers and what they have lived through on their journeys humanize institutionally invisible lives. This approach allows for a process of reflection to be established, making it possible to become sensitive to the pain of the other (LaPlantine) and to processes of collective oppression, especially against women and mothers. At the same time, it provides an opportunity to strip away filters, masks, and social conventions. The reluctance to engage in this reflective process is neither incidental nor random; it finds its explanation in the very purpose of matricentric feminism, or maternal theory, which examines and theorizes how and why normative motherhood endures (O'Reilly and Green).

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Endnotes

1. All translations from Portuguese are my own.
2. Names are pseudonyms.

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Parallel Transitions: Mothering an Adolescent While Aging

Mothering in the menopause transition is a significant experience in the life course. Using autoethnography through a feminist standpoint framework, the author places her mothering experiences under the exploration of performing motherhood, intensive mothering, and mothering and aging. The author details how being an older mother going through the physical and emotional changes of perimenopause parallels the developmental changes of her adolescent son. Because dominant discourses define menopause as a sense of loss and motherhood as a youthful endeavour, the author aims to make sense of her role as an aging mother. Through empathy, the author finds a space to mother authentically.

Introduction

My understanding of mothering, the work of nurturing and caring for a child, was initially shaped by my own mother, sister, friends, and peers, whereas my study of motherhood, the social construct describing cultural and societal norms and expectations, evolved through my academic training in sociology.¹ Transcending both was my interest in how women in everyday life mother and navigate institutional discourses of motherhood alongside other identities and responsibilities. As a graduate student researching the lives of low-income single mothers and their positioning in relation to larger institutions, I was not yet a mother myself and was inexperienced in the day-to-day pressures of nurturing and caretaking, particularly without significant resources. Through research, I uncovered the normative, patriarchal discourses regulating maternal experiences through the lives of the mothers I came to know. As Andrea O'Reilly argues, "Patriarchal motherhood ... marginalizes and renders illegitimate alternative practices of mothering" and as a normative discourse "polices all women's mothering and results in the pathologizing of those

women who do not or cannot perform normative motherhood” (58). Falling outside the ideal motherhood script—white, middle-class, married, age-appropriate, and heterosexual—renders many mothers invisible or deviant. While I mostly align with the ideal script of motherhood, having become a mother at thirty-seven and now entering menopause at fifty with a teenage son, my experience does not entirely follow the typical narrative.

Unlike motherhood, which I approached with a strong foundation of research and anecdotal exposure, perimenopause arrived with little preparation or understanding. Despite teaching women and health courses, I encountered a gap in both academic and popular discourse around the menopause transition. Many available narratives focus narrowly on physical symptoms, omitting the broader emotional, psychological, and identity shifts accompanying this phase. My comprehension of what was happening to me physically and mentally came slowly through conversations with my sister (discovering that our own mother rarely talked about her perimenopausal and menopausal symptoms), through reading, and through connecting with other women. As I contemplated my life changes, at the same time trying to understand my teenager’s developmental phase, the juxtaposition intrigued me: As I was experiencing an ending of sorts through menopause, my son was entering his own beginning through puberty. We were both navigating major hormonal developmental changes, but while his transformation was framed as a new chapter, mine was culturally coded as decline or loss.

The overlap of mothering a teenager and experiencing menopause, a rarely discussed convergence, left me searching for meaning in both personal and societal contexts. What does this significant shift mean for our relationship, and how do I make sense of this new phase in both our lives as it reshapes my identity as a mother? In this essay, I share personal insights into mothering a teenager through my menopause transition. Using autoethnography through a feminist standpoint framework, I seek to understand my mothering experiences through exploring performing motherhood, intensive mothering, as well as mothering and aging. I suggest that this phase of the life course demands new ways of thinking about mothering and motherhood—ones that centre around aging, reflexivity, empathy, and the emotional labour of change.

Feminist Standpoint

In her numerous works, Dorothy Smith promotes a women’s standpoint within “relations of ruling.” Ruling institutions, such as patriarchal motherhood, manufacture ideas and discourses structuring how members of society view their social world and also how to evaluate their own experiences. Smith suggests that a “women’s standpoint” exposes and challenges the relations of ruling through the embodiment of women’s everyday experiences:

“The embodied knower begins in her experience. Here she is an expert. I mean by this simply that when it comes to knowing her way around in it, how things get done ... and all the unspecifiables of her daily doings and the local conditions on which she relies—when it comes to knowing these matters, she is an expert” (Smith 24). In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins presents an understanding of women’s experiences that includes the intersection of race, gender, and class in challenging the dominant discourses of Black women. The power of self-definition “speaks to the power dynamics involved in rejecting externally defined, controlling images of Black womanhood” (Collins 114). Smith and Collins argue that women have an epistemic advantage because they must understand both the dominant group’s norms and their own position to navigate patriarchal discourses and their own lived experiences. Women’s situated knowledge deconstructs power in knowledge production and makes room for diversity in perspectives, and when women share this knowledge with one another and with larger society, resisting and challenging social norms become foundations for social change. In this essay, I use women’s standpoint as an epistemological framework to situate my experience as a middle-aged, menopausal mother.

Methodology

This scholarly-informed personal essay, a method of autoethnography that is both process and product, explores how my own perimenopausal experience as an older mother to a teenager shapes my mothering perspective and empathy, providing a perspective that challenges the compartmentalization of menopause and mothering. Autoethnography is “research, writing, and method that connects the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social” (Ellis xix). The process of autoethnography involves analyzing lived experiences that affect the trajectory of one’s own life and, as a true ethnographer, evaluating the experience through cultural and social identifications; it conceptualizes personal experience through existing research (Ellis et al. 276). As product, autoethnography illustrates new perspectives on personal experience and uses first-person storylines that engage the reader, although some autoethnographies also use the third person to establish context or report research findings (Ellis et al. 277). Autoethnography is not a grand method seeking universal truth; it is a way to give voice to the changing flows of emotional life and consider personal truths in the context of a wider responsibility to amplify other voices, a method propitious for feminist positioning. By using autoethnography as feminist method, I am “committed to the future of women” (Ettorre, “Feminist Autoethnography” 359), and it is truly my hope that by sharing my middle-age menopausal mothering journey,

I am establishing a relationship with other mothers who will feel validated and empowered to embrace their version of mothering and perhaps even inspire academics to engage in this research.

Elizabeth Ettorre suggests that autoethnography is “ideally suited for feminists who want to be self-reflexive and humble about their positions in the world” (*Autoethnography* 14); additionally, for me, it is a standpoint to situate my positionality and privilege to engage in this analysis of menopausal mothering. I am incredibly humble, and the examination of my own experience establishes how my truths are my own and how I am making sense of them within certain master narratives of mothering. Yet my positionality as a feminist sociologist in academia privileges knowledge production and dissemination. Furthermore, systems, structures, and institutions sustain a mothering journey supporting my privilege as a white, heterosexual, married, and able-bodied woman. Being an older, perimenopausal mother to a teenager is not especially significant when compared to more urgent or structural inequities many mothers face, such as poverty, systemic racism, or lack of access to healthcare and support. I intend to defy a cultural narrative that idealizes youthful motherhood and frames menopause as a closing chapter while still attending to the relational aspects of mothering. While not defined by crisis, my experience unsettles assumptions about what motherhood should look like and highlights the need for broader, more inclusive understandings of maternal identity across the life course.

Performing Motherhood

Heather Dillaway argues that “Motherwork perhaps never wanes: once women are mothers, they are always mothers, and they are always impacted by mothering ideology” (51). In her study of menopausal mothers, she found that women often prioritize the needs of their children, especially teenagers, over their own health, downplaying or even ignoring menopausal symptoms to uphold the image of the good mother. Talking about their own struggles felt selfish, even inappropriate, as their identities are wrapped up in caretaking. Similarly, Corletta Aririguzo et al. found that many mothers put off healthcare, suffer in silence, and rarely discuss menopause with their children, seeing it as irrelevant or even shameful in the context of motherhood (264).

Jocelyn DeGroot and Tennley Vik highlight how “performing motherhood well is not optional, and the mother must enjoy her experience of motherhood (or appear to) in order to be performing motherhood correctly” (45). Drawing on Goffman’s dramaturgy, they highlight how mothers are expected to maintain a polished “frontstage” performance, both in public and online, where they appear composed, fulfilled, and in control. This performance may even be in interactions with mothers’ own children. The perimenopausal first-

time mothers in Patricia Ann Morgan et al.'s study reported mood swings, rage, and a loss of emotional control, symptoms that left them yelling and snapping; however, they also felt the need to hide signs of instability from their children to preserve the image of a good mother (5). This reality, or the "backstage," reveals the exhausting, invisible labour of cognitive load and emotional management that sustains the frontstage good mother illusion, which is often the gendered work of nurturing a family. This labour never ends, as mothers rarely get a break from the performance. Unlike fathers, whose contributions are often more visible and celebrated, mothers are expected to manage everything quietly and seamlessly, often without acknowledging their own needs.

I see myself in these findings. I did not talk to my teenage son about perimenopause, a choice I now view as a missed opportunity to foster mutual understanding about the physical and emotional changes we are both navigating. He is likely more open than I have assumed and maybe would have even felt relieved to know my irritability or fatigue was not about him. But instead of naming what I was going through, I tried to hide my mood swings and physical discomfort. Beneath the surface, I was managing self-doubt, a loss of confidence, and frustration with my aging body, feelings that felt too personal, too messy, and too far from the ideal energetic, youthful, ever-patient mother. Like the women in Aririguzo et al.'s study, I recognize now that silence can be a form of denial, a refusal to accept what aging represents.

By not sharing my experience, I was performing good motherhood through keeping my emotions in check, squashing down feelings of inadequacy, keeping the focus on my child, and not burdening him with my own needs. There were days I dragged myself through work, parenting, and household responsibilities while dealing with brain fog, joint pain, sudden jolts of irritability, and waves of sadness—symptoms I could not talk about without disrupting the good mother image. This is backstage motherwork: the quiet, constant labour of maintaining stability and prioritizing others, even at the expense of one's wellbeing. As Dillaway maintains, when children's needs take precedence, menopause becomes invisible (48). Yet the work and demands of mothering do not pause just because our bodies are changing; we simply adapt, often in silence, to keep up the performance.

Intensive Mothering

Sara Ruddick defines three demands of maternal practice—preservation, growth, and social acceptability—which are met through love, nurturance, and training (17). A foundation of maternal practice is a commitment to the preservation of a child's life through care and love; this first demand is quickly supplemented by the second demand of nurturing a child's emotional and

intellectual growth. As Ruddick explains, “In the middle-class cultures I know best, mothers who believe that children’s development is sufficiently complex to require nurturance shoulder a considerable burden” (20). Despite a child’s growth being affected by other people and variables, such as nurturance provided by other members of a child’s circle of influence, mothers (often through adherence to societal discourses) consider themselves to be primarily responsible for the healthy (or defective) growth of their child. The third demand of social acceptability occurs through the training of the child to meet the needs of the social group to which the mother is a member (Ruddick 21). The focus is not necessarily on the child’s needs but on how the mother actively imparts training strategies to support the child’s growth in socially acceptable ways, according to the social group. As with nurturance, the mother is deemed to be solely responsible for creating a human adaptable to the social world.

Ruddick’s maternal demands of growth through nurturance and social acceptability through training are exemplified through the concepts of intensive mothering and concerted cultivation. The concept of intensive mothering reveals how maternal thinking and performance are rooted in a demanding ideology that defines good mothering through an unwavering attentiveness to children’s needs. Intensive mothering is a commitment of time, financial investment, age-appropriate interaction, energy, affection, and emotional availability of the mother to ensure her children are her sole focus (Hays 54). An extension of intensive mothering, concerted cultivation, is how middle-class mothers “actively foster and assess a child’s talents, opinions, and skills” (Lareau 31) through multiple activities designed to enhance social, academic, athletic, leisure, or other activities. Adhering to intensive mothering suggests a constant involvement in and unwavering commitment to nurturing children, often at the expense of the mothers’ own interests, feelings, needs, and wants. With teenagers, the heavy time investments take the form of managing academic, social, and emotional development through structured activities and oversight and through the mother’s physical and emotional presence, who feels acutely responsible for shaping and guiding their children’s wellbeing during adolescence (Milkie et al. 358). Employed mothers are still expected to be responsible for their children’s wellbeing even when not physically present (Milkie et al. 357). This “extensive mothering” requires thought and planning in assuring adherence to children’s needs and wants and may induce stress and guilt in the mother for not living up to the intensive mothering ideology.

Although I strive for a balanced and nonprivileged approach to mothering, where I push back against the demands of maternal practice, they still sneak into my daily life, especially in trying to understand the new life phase of my teenage son. I read parenting books constantly to make sure I was not “messing him up.” I researched nutrition and healthy physical and emotional

development for adolescents. I questioned whether he was enrolled in intellectually appropriate classes or involved in the right activities. Due to dominant discourses that suggest a mother is the sole influencer in the healthy or deficient growth of a child, I often felt guilty when I was not actively doing something that revolved around my son's welfare, even though I truly knew better.

Being in midlife, I thought about my own social positioning and the nurturance and training I received. With my teenager's movement into adolescence, and my transition into menopause, I began to reflect more upon my own adolescence and the life events that perhaps I never fully processed, revealing my insecurities that affected my self-confidence to mother in the moment. I also began to grieve. I grieved for my mother and how I tested her. I grieved for myself and who I once was and who I wanted to be. With menopause defined as a sense of loss, I was feeling unfulfilled, and that time to redefine myself was running out. I was regretting unhealthy decisions and revisiting paths I never took, projecting my hopes onto my son's boundless potential. I was grieving parts of myself I had not realized I would lose. And in the midst of that grief, my son sometimes pulled away from me in the normal, developmental ways teenagers do, which felt like rejection. In following some intensive mothering discourses, such as my concern about his development and growth, I was missing opportunities to be a truly authentic mother who practices kindness and empathy and finds joy in the basic connection of a human relationship.

I was not being kind to myself as I went through my transitions, which affected my ability to be empathetic to his own. Empathy takes practice, and it is especially hard to engage in it if we do not extend it to ourselves. In acknowledging and accepting what I was going through, I was better able to place both of our experiences in context. Although I may not have vocalized our similarities in changing physical and emotional development, I was engaging in the thoughtful process of perspective-taking and validating experiences as they were without judgment. Mothers are complex, and even though intensive mothering suggests an unyielding attention to children's needs and wants, I realized it is so important for mothers to pay attention to their own, particularly as they experience significant life course transitions.

Mothering and Aging

The expectations around performing motherhood and adhering to the intensive mothering discourse are demanding, no matter where mothers are in the life course; they rarely account for a mother's own evolving self through a changing body and identity and emotional landscape. While youthful discourses of motherhood are perpetuated, the reality is that many women are

having children in their late thirties and early forties,² and life transitions during this time, such as pregnancy, motherhood, perimenopause, and menopause, can trigger vulnerability and demand adaptation (Morgan et al. 2). First-time perimenopausal mothers, aged thirty-nine to forty-seven, in Morgan et al.'s study compared themselves to younger mothers, attributing their low energy and fatigue to their age. As Victoria Team writes in her essay on midlife burnout, "My sense of normalcy during this period diminished when I compared my health and mothering capabilities in midlife to my earlier years" (153). Team's "perimenopause burnout" involved a "discordance between my enthusiastic self and my weak body" (152). Not only were hormone changes to blame, but also Team's multiple roles as a mother, worker, and caregiver, which left her little time to engage in self-care. Hormonal shifts and multiple roles affect midlife burnout, as well as the immense social and structural pressures around balancing careers, caregiving, identity, and the reality of the antipathy towards the aging woman.

In a culture that equates youth with value, older women are often judged as less relevant, less competent, and less worthy simply because they are aging. The pressure to retain a youthful appearance persists despite hormonal changes that may contribute to weight gain and visible and normal physical changes, such as loss of skin elasticity, wrinkles, or grey hair. Women aged fifty-four to seventy-six in the study by Shlomit Lir and Liat Ayalon (260) discussed their various attitudes towards appearance in their older age. Despite being "educated, feminist, activist, and gender-conscious" (267), many of the women experienced sorrow and grief, self-dislike, and a sense of loss in losing their youthful appearance (261). They felt a disconnect with their outside appearance not representing their younger inner self, internalizing self-ageism (262). While aging women experience these changes in physical appearance and energy, possibly depleting their emotional stability, they also experience the pressure to fit the idealized discourse of motherhood.

As a first-time mother at thirty-seven, I was ready, and I was full of energy and excitement to mother a newborn. I was healthy physically and emotionally, and joyful to engage in my new purpose and challenge. Through his toddler years and early childhood, I continued to feel a zest for life, enjoying all the new things my son and I were learning together; his natural childhood curiosity fuelled my love of learning. When I stopped dying my hair and let it go grey, I did not think anything of it, even when I had been mistaken for my son's grandmother. We were still having fun, and I was confident in my work and mothering role. But when entering and experiencing perimenopause, I started to feel a decline in how good I felt about myself. The COVID-19 pandemic brought many of us to an online space of video meetings, and it was in one of these meetings that I became dissatisfied with my appearance. All I could see were forehead lines, crow's feet, sagging cheeks, and dull grey hair.

The grey hair did not bother me before, but it was now physically marking me as an older woman and a mother, deviating from the youthful maternal image. For me, perimenopause triggered more anxiety and depression than postpartum ever did. My aging body, shifting hormones, sleepless nights, unfamiliar symptoms—such as ovulation pain, tingling hands, and hot flashes—left me feeling disoriented and disconnected from who I had been. Like Mary in Aririguzo et al.'s study, I often felt like I did not know who I was anymore: "I just don't know how to control the emotions ... I feel like I'm useless ... then I throw myself a pity party" (qtd. in Aririguzo et al. 267). I was feeling the loss of youth, and it was affecting how I felt about mothering.

While my teenager grew stronger and more independent, I felt like I was shrinking—literally and metaphorically. There is a strange irony to parenting a teenager while your own body is in hormonal chaos. I was trying to model strength and stability, but I was dealing with unpredictable cycles, bloating, brain fog, and a growing sense of physical and emotional depletion. Gone were the physical demands of toddlerhood, but now came the mental load of scheduling activities, keeping up with a fast-moving teenager, and worrying about his mental health while silently questioning my own. Perimenopause was not just challenging my body; it was pushing up against my identity as a woman and as a mother, still trying to feel vital and relevant. The loss of control over aging, and the shame in feeling bad about it because my concerns seemed unwarranted among more significant mothering challenges, left me emotionally depleted. For me, my grief was about no longer fitting the image of the ideal mother: the upbeat, energetic, working mom who still finds time to find joy in all the things she does.

As I continued to experience what I felt were shortcomings, which were simply natural aspects of aging and mothering, I found it imperative to be open about these feelings with other women. Sharing conversations, laughter, tears, and mutual frustrations with my friends and sister about the physical symptoms and emotional upheaval of perimenopause was vital for my wellbeing. Even honest admissions like "My gosh, did someone just crank up the heat" in encounters with similarly aged acquaintances minimized the stigma around the menopause transition, opening up a path for honest and supportive connections. Being frank about how our children make us feel and suggesting and acting upon ways to prioritize our needs provide a space for mothers to support one another. Whether through academic studies or kitchen table talk, information and exchanges validate our experiences and push back against the narrow cultural scripts defining motherhood and perimenopause and menopause. Motherhood and menopause are not mutually exclusive; they coexist in ways that deeply shape our wellbeing (Dillaway 43). And as I reflect upon my own experiences through the lens of research on performing motherhood, intensive mothering, and aging as a mother, I suggest we not be

silent about our emotional, physical, and psychological realities. The dominant representations of motherhood rarely make space for living through our complexities, but we carry on. We endure and adapt, and in perimenopause and menopause, we mother through the chaos happening within our own bodies. This significant transition is not just something to survive—it is a chance to redefine. As Aririguzo et al. suggest, we can use this phase to renegotiate our relationships with ourselves and others, reclaiming womanhood and motherhood on our own terms (271).

Conclusion... For Now

Mothering is not a static endeavour; it is an ever-changing, evolving practice shaped by historical, cultural, and structural forces across the life course. As scholarly research and lived experiences indicate, motherhood intersects with numerous variables: race, class (access to resources), age of mother, age and number of children, sexuality, religion, environment, relationship to a partner or spouse, and gendered expectations. It is a profoundly social and deeply personal role, in which it is not known how we will cope with the changes, uncertainties, and challenges of mothering until we are experiencing them. From the early stages of caregiving to the shifting roles in later life—such as navigating the teenage years, maintaining love and care for adult children, grandparenting, other-mothering, and experiencing other transitions—mothering continually reflects broader societal values while also redefining them. Understanding mothering across the life course reveals individual and collective truths through transformations and adaptations from the accumulation of experiences over time, showing that mothering cannot be separated from the social context in which it unfolds.

At a personal level, mothering means negotiating between ideals and realities, between the culturally constructed notion of the “good mother” and the day-to-day complexities of care, labour, and identity. As life continues, our understanding of what it means to be a mother and to be mothered adapts and reflects our lived experiences, suggesting our mothering journey is rarely linear or predictable. Instead, it is textured with love, guilt, joy, pain, resilience, and transformation. A mothering handbook does not exist, nor should it. Depending on who we are and what stage we are in our life course, we are capable of defining our own motherhood.

Through my menopause transition and embrace of the changes in my teenager’s development, I continue to work on identifying who I am and my role as a mother. I am concerned about the future for both of us (albeit for different reasons), but I work to be as present as I can be and to practise empathy for both of us. The hormone changes during perimenopause were significant, affecting my mental health and making me reframe who I am as a

woman and mother, and I know I am not done. I am not in a time of loss as menopause suggests, but a time of renewal and a way to reestablish a different type of relationship with myself and my son—one that will change again as we both grow.

Mothering cannot be understood outside of its relational core; we care for and love our children, and our relationship with them shapes who we are and who we become. While writing this essay, I emotionally connected to the story of Kyrylo Illiashenko, a thirteen-year-old Ukrainian boy who helped rescue passengers, including his mother, from a burning bus after a Russian missile attack. In the chaos, mother and son were separated. Even as he sensed the bus might explode, Kyrylo broke a window, escaped, opened the door, and began pulling people out. “I kept looking for my mom,” he said (qtd. in Kakissis). Those words brought me to tears. His instinct to search for her, to be reunited with her, captures the deep, unspoken bond between mother and child—one built over years of presence, love, and care.

I told my own son this story on the way home from school; car rides are well-timed for brief but important conversations. With tears in my eyes and a trembling voice, I described what Kyrylo had gone through, and I said how unfair it was for a boy his age to experience the atrocities of war and to be faced with such a crucial decision. I told him how heartbreaking it would be to be separated like that and how much I loved him. I reached over and patted his knee. In that moment, I was not performing motherhood or striving for an ideal. I was simply mothering from a place of connection and truth, authentic mothering with empathy and presence. And in this phase of our lives, when so much feels uncertain and in transition, these small, honest moments of connection remind me of the true meaning of motherhood.

Endnotes

1. I informed my son that I was writing this piece about mothering and motherhood that included him and some of our experiences. I asked him if that was okay. He said, “cool.” Consent and permission granted.
2. The CDC reports that the birth rate rose for women ages thirty-five to thirty-nine by 3 per cent and for women aged forty to forty-four by 4 per cent from 2023 to 2024. The birth rate for women aged forty to forty-four has risen almost continuously from 1985 to 2024 (Hamilton et al. 3).

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The Motherwork Effect: The Role of Cognitive Labour in the Motherhood Penalty

In 2023, economist Claudia Goldin was awarded the Nobel Prize for her analysis of the gender wage gap in the United States. Goldin demonstrates that most of today's gender wage gap for American college graduates starts with marriage and/or children, which is referred to as the "parenthood effect." This article argues that the "parenthood effect" is a "motherwork effect" (as defined by Andrea O'Reilly). The income inequality identified by Goldin is heavily gendered, substantially driven by the labour of motherwork, and affects mothers all over the world. To identify and understand the problem, we must first acknowledge that this issue is not just about women: it is also, and mostly, about mothers. This article uses a matricentric feminism lens to highlight this distinction and to propose a paradigm shift in gender equality policies, guided by Gooden's "name, blame, claim framework." It explores why and how motherhood accentuates gender inequality by analyzing a recent study that quantifies the amount of household labour that mothers of young children tend to be responsible for and proposes a solution to the unequal division of household labour: the Fair Play cards. Finally, this article uses concepts from multiple matricentric feminist scholars to both commend and critique the Fair Play approach. Although this approach is an important contribution towards the goals of matricentric feminism, it may inadvertently reinforce the institutions of motherhood and patriarchy because it does not reach far enough in advancing empowered mothering (O'Reilly). It concludes by offering a few recommendations as next steps.

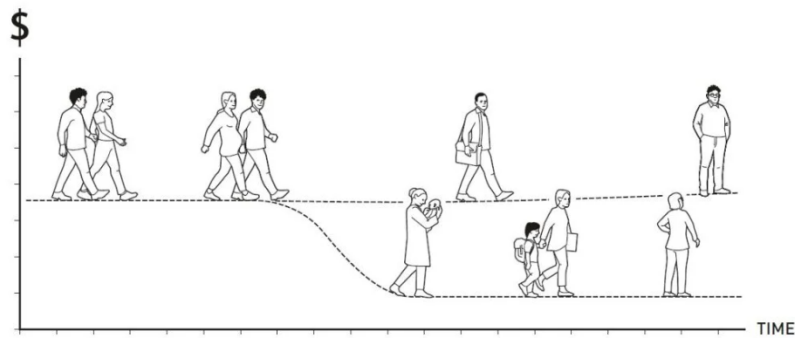
Introduction

Matricentric feminism is needed because mothers—arguably more so than women in general— remain disempowered despite sixty years of feminism.

—Andrea O'Reilly and Fiona Greene 10

In 2023, economist Claudia Goldin was awarded the Nobel Prize for her analysis of the gender wage gap in the United States (US). Her work explores the reasons why women have struggled to achieve a career and family to the same degree as men. From the 1930s to the 1950s, significant factors explaining this gap include explicit discrimination, bias, and sexual harassment, particularly when intersectional data are considered. Today, these factors account for a smaller share of the earnings gap, and another small share is attributed to “occupational segregation”—the fact that women and men are selecting professions that are typically gendered and where there is an existing pay gap (such as nurses and doctors, as well as teachers and professors). Goldin demonstrates that most of today’s gender wage gap for American college graduates starts with marriage, having children, or both, approximately ten years after college graduation (The Harvard Gazette, “Economist”). Goldin refers to this as the “parenthood effect” (see Figure 1)

We can now see that the earnings gap between women and men in high-income countries is somewhere between ten and twenty per cent, even though many of these countries have equal pay legislation and women are often more educated than men. Why is this? Goldin attempts to answer precisely this question and, among other things, succeeds in identifying one key explanation: parenthood.



The parenthood effect. © Johan Jarnestad/The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences

Figure 1. The parenthood effect (Nobel Prize)

This article argues that the “parenthood effect” is a “motherwork effect” (as defined by Andrea O’Reilly). The income inequality identified by Goldin is heavily gendered and substantially driven by the labour of motherwork, particularly, its invisible dimension. This is the case not only in the US and Canada, but also worldwide. Internationally and nationally, mothers and motherwork should be a starting point when analyzing intersectional inequalities in labour dynamics. To identify and understand the problem, we

must first acknowledge that this dynamic is not just about women: it is also, and mostly, about mothers. This article uses a matricentric feminist lens to highlight this important distinction and to propose a paradigm shift in gender equality policies, guided by Gooden's name, blame, claim framework. We must recognize mothers and motherwork as a standalone category in all international and national data to see a more complete and accurate picture.

This article then explores why and how motherhood accentuates gender inequality by analyzing a recent and pioneering study quantifying the amount of household labour mothers of young children tend to be responsible for. One of the authors of that study, Eve Rodsky, had previously launched a gamified card system to help families redistribute domestic labour: the Fair Play cards. This article explores the system's proposal to distribute household labour more equally and discusses the role of the study and the cards in the Gooden framework.

Finally, this article uses concepts from multiple matricentric feminism scholars to commend and critique the card system's approach to improving gender inequality. On the one hand, the system illustrates Sara Ruddick's maternal thinking concept, and it aligns with Sarah Lachance Adams's maternal ambivalence concept. On the other hand, the system would benefit from some adjustments to ensure it does not reinforce normative motherhood (as defined by O'Reilly). This paper concludes that while Fair Play is an important contribution towards the goals of matricentric feminism, it may inadvertently reinforce the institutions of motherhood and patriarchy because it does not reach far enough in advancing empowered mothering (as defined by O'Reilly). The article also offers a few recommendations as next steps.

Part One: The Role of Greedy Work in the Gendered Oppressions of Motherwork

One of the key issues driving the gender wage gap in the US is what Goldin calls "greedy work"—work that is inflexible and involves overtime, weekend time, and/or evening work. Greedy work is incompatible with caregiving responsibilities in that it cannot accommodate things like flexible work hours (e.g., for children's appointments or activities) or work after hours (e.g., when schools and daycares are closed). American couples today manage this by having one member of the couple take a high-paying job, while the other takes a job that allows for caregiving responsibilities to maximize family earnings. In heterosexual couples, it is typically the man who takes on the greedy career. In sum: "Women have been swimming upstream, holding their own but going against a strong current of endemic income inequality.... Gender norms that we have inherited get reinforced in a host of ways to allot more of the childcare responsibilities to mothers, and more of the family care to grown daughters"

(The Harvard Gazette, “Gender Pay Gap”). However, the greediest work of all is motherwork, given it is a 24/7 job, 365 days of the year, and is the most difficult to outsource.

In Canada, we see a similar story. In 2022, the Vanier Institute of the Family published a research snapshot, showing that the Canadian gender income gap is “related to the amount of time spent on household work and child care, which is done primarily by women” (“Research Snapshot”), that it becomes important with marriage, and that it is the largest among married couples with children. In 2024, the Vanier Institute published its full report on family work. It highlights that while most mothers of young children work for pay, they continue to face the “motherhood penalty” once they have children, which typically includes lower employment rates and incomes (The Vanier Institute of the Family 44). Women also continue to be more likely to be pushed into part-time work (44) or self-employment (64) to care for children. The report also shows that the gender gap persists at home, with women spending more time per day on housework and mothers spending more minutes per day with children (56). Caregiving generally (for children and care-dependent adults) continues to affect women more than men (49), and working from home increases the time spent on care-related activities more for women than for men (57). The report emphasizes why this matters: “The division of tasks remains gendered: women continue to do most meal preparation, laundry, and indoor housework in family homes” (56), which affects women’s wellbeing and participation in the labour force. The report also highlights that mothers are affected the most, since the largest gender income gap is among married couples with children. Since time spent on unpaid labour is more important with children than without, it likely grows with each additional child.

The United Nations (UN) also recognizes the importance of domestic work and carework in gender inequality. In its 2024 Progress Report towards the Sustainable Development Goals, the UN states that progress was “clearly off track” for the fifth goal (Achieve Gender Equality and Empower all Women and Girls) due to a lack of nondiscriminatory laws, a lack of quotas in national parliaments, gendered unpaid domestic and carework, and a lack of systems to track public allocations for gender equality. Domestic and carework is tracked as target 5.4 of the fifth goal, and the 2024 report indicates that on an average day, “women spend about 2.5 times as many hours in unpaid domestic and care work as men, according to the latest data from the period 2000–2022” (11). Regional differences are important: The figure is 3.1 times for Sub-Saharan Africa, and 4.9 times for Northern Africa and Western Asia (UN, *Gender Snapshot* 13).

The UN’s International Labour Organization (ILO) adopted a resolution in June 2024 to highlight “the essential links between the care economy, gender

equality, decent work, sustainable development, and social justice” (ILO, “News Release”); it recognizes that women “make up the majority of paid and unpaid care work throughout the world” (ILO, “Texts Adopted”). The ILO’s 2018 report on unpaid carework highlights how “the provision of unpaid care mirrors disadvantages based on gender, class, race and location, disability and HIV and AIDS status, and nationality, among others” (ILO, *Care Work* 38). Unpaid carework continues to be the main barrier preventing women from entering, remaining, and progressing in the labour force. Despite this, care work data continues to be underestimated due to methodology gaps (*Care Work* 42–46) and even excluded from measurements of national wealth, such as the gross domestic product (GDP) (47).

The 2018 ILO report is one of the rare publications that includes data specifically on mothers, highlighting that “the amount of time dedicated by women to unpaid care work increases markedly with the presence of young children in the household” (*Care Work* xxxii) and that “it results in what can be termed a ‘motherhood employment penalty,’ which is found globally and consistently across regions for women living with young children” (*Care Work* xxxiii). The report also includes data on grandparents, showing how grandmothers provide a substantial amount of unpaid care across the world (*Care Work* 51), and data on children, showing how teenage girls are important contributors of carework and household work (*Care Work* 63). Global attitudes and preferences related to the gender division of paid and unpaid labour are also discussed, highlighting that gendered stereotypes and social norms remain strong in most countries and that women are still expected to fulfill caring and nurturing roles not only towards their children but also towards their husbands and other family members (*Care Work* 103). This ILO report highlights how mothers and motherwork are critical data elements in understanding intersectional inequalities present in labour dynamics, including because motherwork tends to be provided by multiple women, it tends to represent multiple types of labour being provided simultaneously (e.g., making dinner while helping with homework), and it tends to be present even without children (e.g., when a man gets married, some of the motherwork provided to him by his mother gets transferred to his wife, a phenomenon Goldin and the Vanier Institute note is happening even in North America).

Worldwide, women and mothers have increased their paid labour participation while continuing to do substantially more unpaid work than men. The gender wage gap is also a gender labour gap at home, and it is not just about women: it is also, and mostly, about mothers. Mothers continue to face unique challenges in the fight for gender equality due to household labour, including caregiving responsibilities. The “gendered oppressions of motherwork” (O’Reilly and Green 9) have long been explored and theorized in matricentric feminism, but most research outside of that space does not

systematically disaggregate mothers from women, thereby invisibilizing many of the key issues. Although this problem is widely discussed, only matricentric feminism has identified that we must start by recognizing the category of “mother” separately from the category of “woman” (O’Reilly and Green 9). Similarly, we cannot solve issues related to carework without discussing motherwork specifically.

To create meaningful and lasting progress in gender equality policies worldwide, we must begin by recognizing mothers and motherwork as standalone categories. Gooden’s name, blame, claim framework is a well-established tool to improve equity and diversity in public administrations (McCandless et al.). The first step, naming inequities, is to identify and admit issues, an important part of which is data collection and analysis. We have seen that mothers and motherwork are frequently rendered invisible in other datasets (e.g. women or parents). Organizations should consistently produce disaggregated and intersectional data on mothers and motherwork when reporting data on labour, leadership roles, and more. With the correct data, we can move to step two, blaming inequities, which is to understand why the inequity exists and persists. The third step, claiming inequities, is to take meaningful actions to improve the situation.

Although we know that motherhood and motherwork accentuate gender inequality, household labour has been historically difficult to study and measure. One recent study published in the *Archives of Women’s Mental Health* proclaims to be “the first to investigate cognitive and physical dimensions within the same household tasks” (Aviv et al. 5). The study identifies that mothers are disproportionately affected by cognitive labour, which contributes to answering step two of Gooden’s framework.

Part Two: The Role of Cognitive Household Labour in Gender Inequality

One of the difficulties in measuring household labour is that this type of labour requires a significant amount of invisible tasks, such as planning and anticipating. Elizabeth Aviv and colleagues have demonstrated that “women’s share of cognitive labor was more disproportionate than physical household labor” and that “cognitive labor was associated with women’s depression, stress, burnout, overall mental health, and relationship functioning” (5). If cognitive labour is a key factor driving gender inequality and impacting maternal health and wellbeing, it is important to dive deeper into what this looks like. Elizabeth Aviv et al. developed a household labour inventory based on the Fair Play cards framework, each of which represents a domestic task and a statistical tool to analyze the data. The authors explain why the cards merit empirical assessment:

The Fair Play card deck includes 100 cards, each representing a

category of household or childcare tasks, and was developed for public dissemination. The original author of the cards interviewed more than 500 families to qualitatively pilot and test the set of tasks. The card deck has sold over 85,000 units, of which 44,000 were sold in the last year alone (NPD Circana BookScan n.d.). Thus, given that this measure is already being used by thousands of families to quantify household labor, it merits empirical assessment. (8)

The paper selected thirty out of the one hundred cards representing common and frequently performed tasks that were specifically applicable to parents of two- to three-year-old children. The results show that mothers reported greater cognitive labour for twenty-nine out of the thirty tasks (see Figure 2)—72.75 per cent of all cognitive labour and 63.64 per cent of all physical domestic labour (Aviv et al. 9).

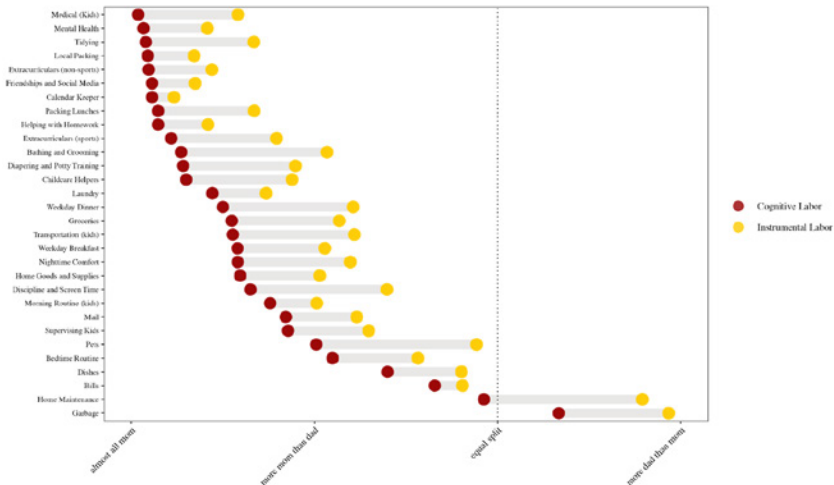


Figure 2. Division of domestic labour by household task (Aviv et al. 9).

Although physical workload is not associated with depressive symptoms, stress, personal burnout, or overall mental health, cognitive workload is, and therefore it is identified as a “meaningful correlate of psychological functioning in mothers” (Aviv et al. 10). The data also show that “less cognitively demanding tasks that do not relate to childcare (e.g., garbage, home maintenance, and bills) tended to be divided more equally between mothers and their partners, whereas cognitively demanding, child-related tasks (kids’ healthcare, tidying, and packing kids’ backpacks) were most gendered, with mothers shouldering a larger share of these responsibilities” (Aviv et al. 10). The study also notes that “the particularly deleterious effects of cognitive labor may be due, in part,

to its invisibility” (Aviv et al. 11). Cognitive labour can often go unrecognized by others and by oneself, and it can take away mental resources for other work or leisure (Aviv et al. 11).

The authors emphasize that this study lays the groundwork for future research that “should incorporate other aspects of the construct of cognitive labour that have been outlined in the qualitative literature, such as the degree of its invisibility and its time-boundedness” (Aviv et al. 12). The authors also note that this study was “limited by its well-educated, high-income convenience sample” and that a lower socioeconomic status sample would likely reveal “more striking discrepancies in domestic labour, and a greater impact on wellbeing” (Aviv et al. 11). Upcoming research projects are expected to include a comparison of parenting and nonparenting couples to better understand how the division of cognitive labour might change during parenthood, and an analysis of income and occupational status to better understand how couples make decisions about their division of cognitive labour (Aviv et al. 12).

Now that we have analyzed how household cognitive labour influences gender inequality, maternal health, and maternal wellbeing—answering the “blame” in Gooden’s framework—we will explore the Fair Play system’s proposed solution to see if it could contribute to the “claim” in Gooden’s framework. Is redistributing cognitive labour enough to make meaningful progress on the road towards gender equality?

Part Three: Fair Play’s Proposal to Redistribute Domestic Work

The Fair Play Institute is a private foundation created by Eve Rodsky, a Harvard-trained organizational management professional. In 2019, she created four rules and a card game to make invisible work visible and divide household tasks for couples more equitably. Rodsky then partnered with Procter and Gamble in 2023 to publish a curriculum to “provide resources for the next generation to change the narrative around the gendered division of domestic labor” (“Fair Play Newsletter”). In 2025, she contributed to the first study quantifying cognitive labour and its impact on maternal mental health (Aviv et al., 2025). The Institute’s home page states that “by making the invisible care historically held by women visible, Fair Play inspires a more equitable and intentionally balanced future” (“Fair Play Method”; see Figure 3). Both Rodsky and the Institute have active Instagram accounts (@everodsky and @fairplaylife), which they use to promote the Fair Play brand and share like-minded content.

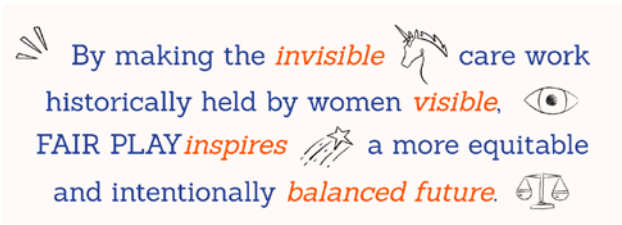


Figure 3. FairPlayPolicy.org

The cards represent a gamified system of the invisible tasks it takes to run a home. There are one hundred cards, each listing one household task (examples in Figure 4).

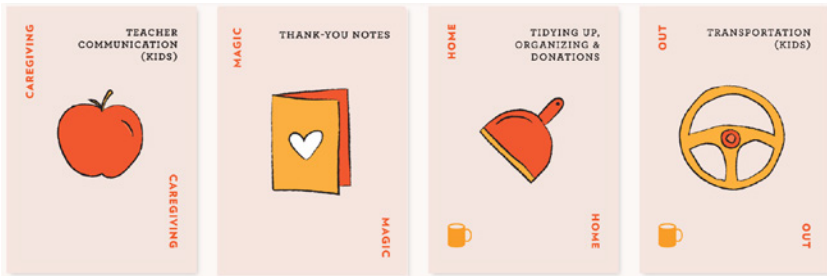


Figure 4. Illustration of Fair Play cards

Each of the cards breaks down the conception, planning, and execution for each task, thus recognizing both invisible and visible parts of household labour (example in Figure 5).

Definition

Your family needs to eat. Can we all agree on that? Good. So how do the pantry and refrigerator get stocked on an ongoing basis? With CPE. This includes noticing what's about to be used up or expire, keeping a running grocery list, and getting to the market . . . ideally before you realize there's not a drop of milk in the fridge. Even if your family orders groceries online and your go-to dinner is frozen pizza, this card requires CPE nearly 365 days a year. Consult the various "meals" cardholders regularly so you can be sure you have taco shells in the cupboard for taco night.

**You have selected a Daily Grind card! On any given day there are 30 of these time-sucking jobs that must be done regularly, repetitively, and many at a very specific time.*

Conception

GROCERIES (DG)*

Planning

- Making a master list (consulting with "meals" cardholder)
- Checking refrigerator and pantry for what is low and adding to list

Execution

- Shopping (grocery stores and/or online), loading and unloading groceries
- Placing items in pantry/refrigerator
- Throwing away expired items from refrigerator/freezer

Minimum Standard of Care

Are the appropriate, agreed-upon groceries in the home when you need them?

Figure 5. Conception, planning, and execution (CPE) breakdown for the groceries card. <https://www.fairplaylife.com/the-cards>

Each of the cards is associated with one of six categories: home, out, caregiving, magic, unicorn space, and wild. Figure 6 lists all the cards and groups them into their respective categories.

Home	Out
Childcare Helpers (Kids)	Auto
Cleaning	Birthday Celebrations (Other Kids)
Dishes	Calendar Keeper
Dry Cleaning	Cash & Bills
Garbage	Charity, Community Service & Good Deeds
Groceries	Civic Engagement & Cultural Enrichment
Home Furnishings	Electronics and IT
Home Goods and Supplies	Extracurricular (Kids; Non-Sports)
Home Maintenance	Extracurricular (Kids; Sports)
Home Purchase/Rental, Mortgage, & Insurance	First Aid, Safety & Emergency
Hosting	Packing & Unpacking (Kids; Local)
Laundry	Packing & Unpacking (Travel)
Lawn & Plants	Points, Miles & Coupons
Mail	Returns & Store Credits
Meals (Kids; School Lunch)	School Breaks (Kids; Non-Summer)
Meals (Weekday Breakfast)	School Breaks (Kids; Summer)
Meals (Weekday Dinner)	School Forms (Kids)
Meals (Weekend)	Social Plans (Couples)
Memories & Photos	Transportation (Kids)
Money Manager	Travel
Storage, Garage & Seasonal Items	Tutoring & Coaching (Kids)
Tidying Up, Organizing & Donations	Weekend Plans
Caregiving	Magic
Bathing & Grooming (Kids)	Adult Friendships (Player 1)
Bedtime Routine (Kids)	Adult Friendships (Player 2)
Birth Control	Birthday Celebrations (Your Kids)
Clothes & Accessories (Kids)	Discipline & Screen Time (Kids)
Dental (Kids)	Extended Family
Diapering & Potty Training (Kids)	Fun & Playing (Kids)
Estate Planning & Life Insurance	Gestures of Love (Kids)
Friendships & Social Media (Kids)	Gifts (Family)
Grooming & Wardrobe (Player 1)	Gifts (VIPs)
Grooming & Wardrobe (Player 2)	Hard Questions (Kids)
Health Insurance	Holiday Cards
Homework, Projects & School Supplies (Kids)	Holidays
Medical & Healthy Living (Kids)	Informal Education (Kids)
	Magical Beings (Kids)

Caregiving (continued)	Magic (continued)
Morning Routine (Kids)	Marriage & Romance
Parents & In-Laws	Middle-of-the-Night Comfort (Kids)
Pets	Partner Coach
School Service (Kids)	Showing Up & Participating (Kids)
School Transitions (Kids)	Spirituality
Self-Care (Player 1)	Thank-You Notes
Self-Care (Player 2)	Values & Good Deeds (Kids)
Special Needs & Mental Health (Kids)	Watching (Kids)
Teacher Communication (Kids)	
Unicorn Space	Wild
Answer this question, then make a commitment to setting aside the time to pursue it:	Aging/Ailing Parent
What makes me feel at least two of the following emotions: exhilarated, content, fulfilled, or focused?	Death
My Unicorn Space for the next six months will be: _____. I will commit _____ a week to pursue it.	First Year of Infant's Life
	Glitch in the Matrix / Daily Disruption
	Home Renovation
	Job Loss & Money Problems
	Moving
	New Job
	Serious Illness
	Welcome a Child into the Home

Figure 6. Fair Play Cards Broken Down into Card Categories. The table was compiled using the ninety-nine cards listed at <https://www.fairplaylife.com/the-cards>.

Three outcomes are promised for using the card system: a new vocabulary to change the couple's conversation on domestic life; a system to set them up for success in their relationship and with parenting; and a way to discover their "unicorn space," defined as something that makes one "feel at least two of the following emotions: exhilarated, content, fulfilled, or focused."

The website states that 61 per cent of individuals who have participated in the Fair Play method have seen "an increase in overall egalitarianism at home" (56 per cent cognitive labour and 54 per cent instrumental labour) and measurable decreases in depression, personal burnout, relationship functioning, and perceived stress ("The Fair Play Method"). In addition, 91 per cent of participants indicate that they would recommend the method to others. The website provides a link to the documentary made about the book (available to paying subscribers of Apple TV, Prime Video, Hulu, YouTube, and Google Play) and provides free discussion questions that help begin the conversation about rebalancing household work.

This article will now explore how these results contribute to matricentric

feminism. Since mothers are disproportionately affected by cognitive labour, do the method's tools provide a solution to the unique problems faced by mothers?

Part Four: Echoes of Maternal Thinking and Maternal Ambivalence

The *Archives of Women's Mental Health* research paper defines cognitive household labour as planning tasks, anticipating needs, and delegating responsibilities (Aviv et al.). This type of labour could be analyzed through Sara Ruddick's concept of maternal thinking, which is described as the intellectual capacities, judgments, metaphysical attitudes, and values that an individual develops once they become a mother (Ruddick 69), and maternal practice is described as follows: "Children 'demand' their lives be preserved and their growth fostered. Their social group 'demands' that growth be shaped in a way acceptable to the next generation. Maternal practice is governed by (at least) three interests in satisfying these demands for preservation, growth, and acceptability." (71).

The categories from the Fair Play cards fit within the realm of maternal thinking and maternal practice, and the data on cognitive household work present an empirical analysis of different elements of maternal thinking and maternal practices. The deck helps everyday people understand the invisible labour that mothers practice daily and helps everyday people try and redistribute the labour within a couple to make it fairer for the mother.

The cards could also help mothers struggling with maternal ambivalence—"the simultaneous and contradictory emotional responses of mothers towards their children" (Adams 556)—that can occur when navigating the many conflicting demands of motherwork. There is a card for self-care that highlights the importance of guilt-free health and wellness routines, and there is a "unicorn space" card that highlights the importance of committing some time every week for something beyond career and family that makes mothers feel at least two of the following emotions: exhilarated, content, fulfilled, or focussed. These cards could help mothers struggling with balancing their needs and their children's needs because they validate that mothers do have needs and that they should be able to satisfy those needs without needing permission or feeling guilty. These needs would include, at the very minimum, some self-care routines and some passions outside of career and family.

Part Five: Shadows of Normative Motherhood

Both the UN and the ILO have highlighted the importance of redistributing unpaid care work, with the ILO's 2018 report specifically citing that "a more equal sharing of unpaid care work between men and women is associated with

higher levels of women's labour force participation" (*Care Work* xxxi). Fair Play proposes a concrete measure that can support mothers in managing their share of unpaid labour with their partner. However, redistributing motherwork between two parents is not enough. Organizations, such as the UN and Fair Play, may inadvertently be reinforcing the institutions of motherhood and patriarchy if they do not actively question Normative Motherhood and if they only offer solutions within this narrative.

Using O'Reilly's ten dictates of normative motherhood (Figure 7)—how mothers are oppressed and regulated by the institutions of motherhood and patriarchy (discourses and practices) (O'Reilly 478)—we can see that Fair Play does not consistently contribute a social-political analysis of the institutions of normative motherhood, nor does it consistently invite others to consider this question.

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- Essentialization** positions maternity as the basis of female identity
 - Privatization** locates motherwork solely in the reproductive realm of the home
 - Individualization** causes such mothering to be the work and responsibility of one person
 - Naturalization** assumes that maternity is natural to women and the work of mothering is driven by instinct rather than intelligence and developed by habit rather than skill
 - Normalization** limits and restricts maternal identity and practice to one specific mode: the nuclear family
 - Idealization** sets unattainable expectations of and for mothers
 - Biologicalization** positions the cisgender birthmother as the "real" and authentic mother
 - Expertization** causes childrearing to be expert driven
 - Intensification** causes childrearing to be all consuming
 - Depoliticalization** characterizes childrearing solely as a private and nonpolitical undertaking, with no social or political import
-

Figure 7. The ten dictates of normative motherhood

The Fair Play method does not consistently question the fact that motherwork should not be limited to the nuclear family (the normalization dictate). Rodsky's Instagram account recently highlighted this fact when she posted the following statement emphasizing that the solution to women's unpaid labour is men's unpaid labour:

After 14 years of @fairplaylife research I have come to the conclusion that every patriarchal system is designed to force women into unpaid labour—of their children, their homes, their schools via PTAs, their in-laws, their parents. Some patriarchal systems are willing to accept labor force participation of women but only because one income households are not sustainable in late stage capitalism. I have testified

for women in family courts and I feel their pain. The only long term societal solution is men doing unpaid labor in the form of housework, childcare and kinkeeping – period. End of story. When men step into their full power in the home women can step into their full power in the world. Even if you don't participate in a hetero cis relationship your life is affected by this structure. (Instagram)

While this post and many others like this one are in the right direction—denouncing the patriarchy and emphasizing that motherwork should be shared with fathers (contributing to denouncing the individualization dictate)—the solution reinforces the normalization dictate. This is problematic for many reasons, including because of certain assumptions related to the functioning of a nuclear family: The card system heavily relies on a couple having good communication and shared priorities and being self-reliant for most motherwork. Many mothers would not be able to use this method, including mothers in a difficult coparenting situation and single mothers. Socioeconomic background and other intersectional elements also affect how useful the cards would be to a mother.

With its long list of cards that are supposed to be divided mostly between two parents, Fair Play also seems to further entrench unattainable expectations for mothers (the idealization dictate) and even the all-consuming nature of childrearing (the intensification dictate). Finally, it seems to adopt a view that childrearing is a private and nonpolitical undertaking, with no social or political import (the depoliticalization dictate). The Fair Play method also does not question the role of the cisgender birthmother (the biologicalization dictate). There is a card for other caregivers—such as childcare helpers (kids) under the home category—but the definition is mostly anchored in normative motherhood:

It takes a village, and you're fortunate if your village includes a nanny, babysitter, family caregivers, or others who pitch in with the kids. It can be a lifesaver to have the help, but it still requires someone to Conceive and Plan before Nanny Poppins or Grandma Shirley shows up to help Execute. They don't magically appear when you want them to, so schedules need to be managed, along with payment, delegation of responsibilities, and ongoing communication. Heads up: When your helper cancels or quits, this cardholder is not necessarily the one who drops everything. Rather, engage in Fair Play immediately to re-deal the applicable cards, for example, "transportation (kids)" and "watching." ("Welcome to Fair Play")

More generally, the cards would require additional adjustments to make them more inclusive. For example, one task may seem quick and easy to someone without a physical or cognitive disability, but it may take someone else much

longer and be more complex if they have one. Another example would be managing tasks for a child with a physical or cognitive disability, although the caregiving category has a special needs and mental health (kids) card; however, just one card does not seem to be enough to recognize and validate all of the different areas that would require additional support. Making this more visible would be important to families living with this reality. A similar lens could be applied to cultural diversity, for example, including additional cards for community caregivers. Another example is the transmission of language and cultural heritage, which can be much more work if a mother is in a mixed marriage or lives far away from their community.

Part Six: Reaching for Empowered Mothering

While Fair Play mitigates the oppression of the institutions of motherhood and patriarchy by helping to equalize household labour, it does not go far enough in questioning the institutions themselves, which is problematic. Making motherwork visible and helping mothers redistribute this work are important, but dismantling normative motherhood is even more vital if we want to truly improve societal outcomes for mothers. This can be done with the help of O'Reilly's theory of empowered mothering, which aims to "reclaim the power for mothers and to imagine and implement a mode of mothering that mitigates the ways that patriarchal motherhood, both discursively and materially, regulates and restrains mothers and their mothering" (O'Reilly 608).

Each of the Fair Play cards should not be dependent on only one other person. A mother should be able to outsource motherwork in a way that aligns with personal choices and values without having to negotiate heavily with anyone else, via a comprehensive societal support system. This support system should be aligned to the five dimensions of motherwork (O'Reilly 611): agency, authority, authenticity, autonomy, and advocacy-activism. The Fair Play Institute should become an advocate for matricentric feminism and incorporate empowered mothering into its mission. We must remember that "matricentric feminism is needed because mothers—arguably more so than women in general—remain disempowered despite sixty years of feminism" (O'Reilly and Greene 10). Circling back to Goldin, solving the "greedy work" problem and closing the gender gaps will require implementing empowered mothering.

Given that the Fair Play method has created an empirical system of different elements of maternal thinking and maternal practices, it could be used as a policy tool to expand the current card categories, explanations, and related datasets, using a cross-cultural and intersectional lens and paying particular attention as to why the method works for some mothers and not for others. The overarching question would be to identify how the Fair Play method

empowers some mothers and their mothering and why it does not work for some mothers (i.e., why was it effective against the regulation and restraining of mothers and their mothering in some situations but not in others?). Reasons could include the partner's willingness to collaborate, marriage, culture, physical or cognitive abilities, housing constraints (i.e., sharing space), and finances.

If so much of the data discussed in this article shows that mothers have been doing excessive unpaid labour for a long time, yet so many have not been able to find a solution, some or many may be trapped in this situation for a variety of reasons, and we need to understand these reasons a lot better. Further, if the excessive unpaid labour was prevalent in the Elizabeth Aviv et al. study of well-educated and high-income mothers, one can only imagine what a more diverse, inclusive, and cross-cultural dataset may reveal (11). This additional data could inform a policy discussion on empowered mothering to provide recommendations to help free mothers from unpaid labour permanently and redistribute motherwork across society. Using the Fair Play method as a stepping stone towards a broader, more inclusive, and matricentric (O'Reilly) sociopolitical analysis would contribute to the third and final step of Gooden's framework.

Conclusion

This article has discussed how mothers are uniquely affected when it comes to gender inequality, arguing that the "parenthood effect" should in fact be termed the "motherwork effect." Marriage and children are consequential for gender inequality because they result in ongoing visible and invisible unpaid labour for mothers that affects their paid labour and their health and wellbeing. Matricentric feminism and Gooden's framework highlight why we must start by discussing mothers and motherwork (naming the inequity). The article then discussed part of why the inequity exists (blaming the inequity). A key factor is cognitive household labour, which is part of the invisible, unpaid labour and underpins the motherhood penalty worldwide. The article discussed the Fair Play Institute's proposal to help mothers manage their domestic labour better and discussed whether this solution is improving the situation (claiming the inequity). While the Fair Play method supports some of matricentric feminism's goals, it does not go far enough in questioning the institutions of motherhood and patriarchy or advancing empowered mothering. To bridge this gap, I recommended using the Fair Play method as a policy tool to expand the current dataset on maternal thinking and practice, which could inform a policy discussion on empowered mothering. I also recommended that Fair Play Institute become an advocate for matricentric feminism and incorporate empowered mothering into its mission.

Since the UN has acknowledged that its goal of achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls is “clearly off track,” urgent action is required by all levels of government and from all areas of civil society. It must start with recognizing mothers separately from women and motherwork separately from carework. Given that it has been seven years since the ILO report on carework and that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated motherwork issues, the ILO should focus one of its next major reports on mothers and motherwork and include both visible and invisible labour in its analysis. With international and national organizations collecting the right data and having policy discussions informed by empowered mothering, policymakers will be able to effectively work towards closing gender gaps and solving the “greedy work” problem.

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Echoes in the Water: La Llorona, Folklore, and the Sacred Geography of Maternal Grief

This article examines La Llorona as a figure rooted in pre-Columbian mythology and reshaped through the colonial encounter, positioning her at the intersection of motherhood, grief, and environmental memory. Emerging from associations with Cihuacoatl, the Aztec goddess of fertility and childbirth, and tied to the sacred geographies of Tenochtitlan's lakes and rivers, La Llorona embodies both Indigenous cosmologies and the ruptures of conquest. Her cry—"¡Ay, mis hijos!" ("Oh, my children!")—functions as a sonic archive and preserves cultural memory while resisting erasure and echoing through literal and symbolic waters as lament and warning. This study also situates La Llorona alongside Ophelia in Hamlet and Imoinda in Oroonoko to trace how female and maternal bodies become symbolic sites of loss across time, space, and empire. Water emerges not merely as backdrop but as sacred and political terrain—both generative and destructive—that anchors cultural identity, ecological reverence, and histories of dispossession. Through oral tradition, visual representation, and embodied geography, La Llorona operates as a living archive of Indigenous resilience, carrying forward intertwined legacies of creation, destruction, and survival. By reading La Llorona through a transhistorical and transgeographical lens, this article illuminates how her legend functions as both cultural memory and an act of resistance, adapting to shifting historical contexts while retaining her power as a figure of mourning, warning, and defiance. In doing so, it invites a reconsideration of folklore as an active terrain where environment, body, and story continually reshape one another.

I cannot recall how old I was when I first heard her cry—not in dreams but from the river, or so they said. In my pueblo, we were warned: "La Llorona will take you if you misbehave." Rivers were more than landmarks; they were passageways to the dead and to stories that clung like mist. Her wail taught

me the silence of women, the mourning of mothers, and grief's haunting power. Rooted in pre-Columbian and colonial histories, the legend preserves Indigenous elements while bearing the traumas of colonization. Though told differently across Latin America, one constant remains: an enraged woman who killed her children and now wanders, weeping. My memories shaped by riverside warnings and inherited fear offer a lived context for seeing her as both myth and method and invite a reading through Indigenous environmental epistemologies that deepens her cultural significance. These memories are not isolated recollections but part of a larger cultural archive in which rivers, voices, and warnings serve as living repositories of Indigenous knowledge. It is from this intersection of personal experience and collective memory that a decolonial reading of La Llorona emerges, situating her legend within broader practices of resistance and epistemic survival.

From this intersection of personal experience and collective memory follows a decolonial reading of La Llorona, rooted in Indigenous studies and drawing particularly on the work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. Through such a framework, La Llorona emerges not only as a folkloric figure but also as a vessel of cultural resistance and epistemic survival. As Smith powerfully asserts, "Imperialism still hurts, still destroys and is reforming itself constantly" (21), and in response, Indigenous communities have cultivated ways of knowing that are embedded in narrative practice. These include "humour, poetry, music, storytelling and other common sense ways" that not only convey historical memory but also carry political and emotional force (21). Within this context, La Llorona's haunting becomes more than a cautionary tale; it becomes what Smith calls "'the talk' about the colonial past" (21), a recurring echo that speaks across generations, not from official archives but from the affective and material spaces of oral tradition, grief, and survival. Her grief, or cry, becomes a sonic marker of cultural memory, a lament that resists erasure and reclaims Indigenous presence. Yet it is also a maternal cry—one rooted in the embodied experience of motherhood as both loss and legacy. The story of La Llorona, passed down intergenerationally, reflects motherhood as an affective labour and highlights the social meaning of mothering across the life course: a continual negotiation between nurture and grief, as well as between cultural continuity and historical rupture. This persistent presence aligns with what Simpson describes as multiple forms of Indigenous mobility—movements that are not merely geographic but epistemological and political. Simpson identifies "at least four kinds of mobility," including those embedded in Indigenous practice, enacted as resistance to colonialism, expressed as strategic resurgence, and forced through displacement or diaspora (196–97). La Llorona's ghostly wandering along riverbanks—whether read through the lens of mourning, punishment, or longing—can be reframed as a maternal form of diasporic mobility rooted in

colonial rupture and ecological displacement. Her grief, suspended between worlds, maps a geography of dispossession, but also of presence—a refusal to disappear.

With this decolonial framework in mind, it becomes essential to consider how folklore scholars have conceptualized the environments that stories inhabit. Robert Saint George, for example, frames material culture as the physical environment shaped by cultural behaviour, showing how human action inscribes meaning onto space. Through these perspectives, folklife studies employ interdisciplinary methods to understand the relationship between material objects, everyday practices, and societal structures. Alan Dundes expands these definitions, arguing that folklore is not confined to the past or marginalized populations—it exists wherever people share collective meaning. Folk groups can be as small as families or as fluid as communities connected by shared values or experiences. Dundes reminds us that folklore is not dying but evolving. This evolution complicates documentation: No single informant can represent the full spectrum of a group's folklore, and oral traditions shift from person to person, taking on new resonances as they move. This conceptual flexibility illuminates the dynamic, embodied nature of stories like that of *La Llorona*. Far from a static tale of caution, *La Llorona*'s cry materializes through rivers, ruins, and rituals. Her voice reverberates as a sonic artifact, her body dissolves into sacred geography, and her grief, embedded in collective memory, persists as a cultural ritual passed from generation to generation. Through this folkloric lens, motherhood emerges at the intersection of body and environment. It becomes a cultural terrain through which legends and literary figures—from *La Llorona* to Ophelia and Imoinda—carry layered histories of identity, cultural memory, and resistance across geographies and temporalities.

Situating *La Llorona* within a broader folkloric tradition reveals how such figures not only preserve memory but also continually transform it across time and space. In this light, folklore is not merely a vessel of preservation but a living, adaptive framework—alive in the people who carry the story, the geographies it inhabits, and the multiple retellings that reshape it. I am particularly drawn to how *La Llorona* embodies a culturally specific form of maternal grief, one inseparable from the landscapes she moves through and from the literary representations that render her visible—or attempt to contain her. Figures like *La Llorona*, Ophelia, and Imoinda reveal how transatlantic narratives of maternal loss and gendered violence intertwine with environment and memory, where grief becomes both aestheticized and politicized.

These colonial-era “skeletons” of the *La Llorona* legend emerging in the 1500s and sometimes linked to *La Malintzin*, Hernán Cortés's Indigenous translator, offer fertile ground for reexamining her from both ecological and sociopolitical perspectives. Her story becomes a site for interrogating Mexican

identity, cultural memory, and the politics of motherhood. If, as Dundes suggests, folklore arises from shared cultural experience, then motherhood, especially as it intersects with body and environment, can be read as a kind of folkloric terrain. This framing invites questions about how maternal figures, particularly Indigenous and Mexican mothers, are shaped by and inscribed upon the landscapes they inhabit. In La Llorona's case, water—both literal and symbolic—becomes central to her embodiment of sorrow, memory, and resistance in pre-Columbian and colonial contexts.

While there are many other versions of La Llorona throughout Latin America, I want to focus on Tenochtitlan, founded in 1325, and what is present-day Mexico City. La Llorona, “The Weeping Woman who appeared in Tenochtitlan in 1509, according to Bernardino de Sahagún’s informants” (Winick), is connected back to Cihuacoatl, the goddess closely connected to fertility, childbirth, and motherhood. According to the *Florentine Codex*, written in the sixteenth century by the Spanish Friar Bernardino de Sahagún, in book one, “The Gods,” Cihuacoatl is said to be found by night walking, weeping, and wailing, and she was also “an omen of war” (11). Cihuacoatl is further described as being “covered in chalk, like a court lady. She wore ear plugs, obsidian ear plugs. She appeared in white, garbed in white, standing white, pure white. Her womanly hairdress rose up,” which was a crown of eagle feathers (Sahagún 11). Cihuacoatl was also known as the Snake-woman: “a savage beast and an evil omen. She was an evil omen to men; she brought men misery” (Sahagún 11). Cihuacoatl—cloaked in white, walking at night, weeping, and bringing omens—lays the mythic and visual groundwork for La Llorona. Her transformation from fertility goddess to spectre of sorrow mirrors the colonial displacement of Indigenous spiritual figures, recast through fear and loss. The white dress shifts from sacred regalia to a shroud of mourning; divine warnings become maternal lamentations. As both patron of childbirth and omen of war, she embodies the Mesoamerican view of women’s bodies as sites of creation and cataclysm. La Llorona inherits and intensifies these contradictions, carrying the grief of conquest, the spiritual erosion of colonialism, and the layered complexity of Indigenous motherhood. Her legend is thus not merely folkloric but cosmopolitical, encoding histories of gendered power, colonization, and survival.



Figure 1. This drawing, from the 1570s, appears in the Florentine Codex, and could be the first illustration of La Llorona (image taken from Winick et al.).

The uncanny resemblance in the stories between Cihuacoatl and La Llorona further connects these two women intrinsically. Through her white dress and veil, originating from Cihuacoatl garbed in white, La Llorona lies in a dichotomy between purity and spiritual transcendence, and mourning and tragedy. Her clothing materializes the legend through Mexico's historical dichotomy of womanhood. The white dress and veil generate a transformative dichotomy between the Virgen of Guadalupe (Virgin Mary) and La Malintzin. Gloria Anzaldúa says that "the true identity of all three has been subverted—*Guadalupe* to make us docile and enduring, *la Chingada* [the Fucked One] to make us ashamed of our Indian side, and *la Llorona* to make us long-suffering people. This obscuring has encouraged the *virgen/puta* (whore) dichotomy" (53). I connect La Llorona's physical garments to the dichotomy between the three Indigenous woman often studied by scholars to each other because the white dress and veil are representative of the purity and innocence associated with la Virgen but also the mourning and pollution linked to La Chingada, also known as La Malintzin (the traitor) who is "the Fucked One," for helping Hernán Cortés and bearing his children. Thus, through her garments and depictions of La Llorona, Anzaldúa links La Llorona's imagery to that of Cihuacoatl, "Serpent Woman, ancient Aztec goddess of the earth, of war and birth, patron of midwives, [and] antecedent of La Llorona. Covered with chalk, Cihuacoatl wears a white dress with a decoration half red and half black" (57). In doing so, she underscores how La Llorona inherits both the sacred and destructive aspects of Indigenous maternal figures. La Llorona once again is represented through a duality, here between half red and half black; her white dress is represented in the image below. Through these representations, La Llorona embodies the complex interplay of purity and impurity, innocence and guilt, drawing from deep-rooted cultural and

historical symbols. The white dress and veil symbolize a multitude of meanings, merging the sacred and the profane, reflecting a profound narrative of Indigenous womanhood that has persisted and evolved over centuries. This duality captures the essence of La Llorona as a figure who transcends simple categorization, embodying the rich history of Mesoamerican folklore and the enduring legacy of Indigenous women like Cihuacoatl, La Malintzin, and the Virgen of Guadalupe, who derive from Tenochtitlan.



Figure 2. Image from the *Florentine Codex*, Book 1: “The Gods”

Barbara E. Mundy describes what was once known as Tenochtitlan, from around 1325 to 1521 (Mexico’s colonization), as follows: “[an] oval island, ringed by lake, [and] the idyllic homeland of Aztlan. The template found its fullest realization in Tenochtitlan itself, which was an island ringed by a lake, which was in turn surrounded by the land of central Mexico, which was then surrounded, or so it once seemed, by the vast seas that stretched out to the east and west forever” (“Ecology” 136). Mundy’s description of Tenochtitlan evokes the mythic and symbolic significance of the Mexica’s ideal home. The land of central Mexico, surrounded by water, is emblematic of Mexico’s integration into the natural environment as a tool and their deep connection to the landscape. The idealization of the land and environment contrasts with Mexico’s colonial narratives emphasizing Tenochtitlan’s enduring legacy, like the legend of La Llorona. As a folkloric legend, La Llorona resonates even

through Tenochtitlan's mythic sense of home as a mother and myth throughout Mexico. Going back to La Llorona's origin, Cihuacoatl, through unofficial sources, is said to have a son and literally cried a river:

Mixcoatl, Cihuacoatl's son was the storm god. Some legends say that she left him one day on a path. After some time she repented her action and went back to find her son. But Mixcoatl was gone, with only a sacrificial dagger left at the place she had seen him last. Cihuacoatl cried and her tears were so many that they filled the waters of Lake Xochimilco. Haunted by her pain, she would not leave the area, searching for her son, Mixcoatl, regretting and sorry for what she had done. Between her screams could be heard "*Ecue nocone*" ("*Oh my son!*"). And so, since the times immemorial the Great Goddess haunted the waters of Xochimilco. (Saadia)

Assuming La Llorona originates from Cihuacoatl, the connection to the Tenochtitlan lake through this retelling creates an innate relationship and reasoning beyond drowning her children in the river as to why she roams bodies of water. In this story, however, Cihuacoatl abandoned her child, and the Tenochtitlan lake, or what is today also known as Xochimilco, came to be. Regardless, the connection to water is embedded through each retelling of this enigmatic woman, as well as the chant or lamentation of "Oh, my children!" These characteristics of La Llorona remain singular through the adaptations and depictions of her story. Through the innate relationship of La Llorona as a mother and the materialization of water, there also lies the important symbol she presents in colonization. Luis D. León says Cihuacoatl is usually represented in various forms in ancient and contemporary Mexican mythology. Part of the story León writes about is how "[Cihuacoatl] was transformed in the cultural imagination into La Llorona during the Spanish conquest of Mexico" (5). The *Aztec Codex* explains the following: "A few years before Spanish ships first landed on the Mexican coast of Vera Cruz in the sixteenth century, a woman circled the walls of the great Aztec city of Tenochtitlán. Late at night she was heard weeping in mourning for the impending destruction of the great Mexican civilization, and especially for her children: 'My children, we must flee far from this city!'" (qtd. in León 5). The destruction of Mexican civilization signalled Mexico's conquering by Hernán Cortés in 1521. La Llorona's cries here become an emblem of warning for the people of Mexico. The Spanish ships arrived through the waters, the lake of Tenochtitlán, which is interlaced with larger bodies of water. These passageways allow for destruction—destruction in the form of colonization and in the form of a woman who supposedly drowned or abandoned her children, resonating a duality of home in motherhood but also malevolent in her ties to water.

The geographical and symbolic weight of these waters invites a broader reading of La Llorona. Anna Perdibon writes on the cosmic and sacredness of rivers and other water sources through ancient Mesopotamian texts: “Rivers are sources of both fertility and destruction, of life and death, of healing and polluting, thus embodying the intrinsic ambivalence of existence with their body of flowing waters” (87). Although Perdibon explores bodies of water through ancient Mesopotamian and not through Mesoamerica, the duality she represents through water still resonates with the Tenochtitlan region, La Llorona, and Cihuacoatl. The duality of rivers as a symbol of creation and destruction facilitates a reading of La Llorona as a legend materializing through the environment. Flowing water represents the fundamental ambivalence of existence, embodying the contrasting and interconnected aspects of the natural world and human experience. Comparably, La Llorona, materialized through water, embodies the emotional ambivalence of human experience—grief, rage, sorrow, and the porous line between madness and mourning.

La Llorona’s origin stories are not only narrative inheritances but also spatial inheritances, anchored in what Mundy describes as “representations of space” (Mundy, *The Death* 11) and the lived geographies of central Mexico. Mundy notes that in the sixteenth century, Mexica people “expressed themselves through images and a largely pictographic script” (Mundy, *The Death* 13), a practice visible in the Codex Mendoza where water, causeways, and chinampas situate Tenochtitlan as a porous island city. The “1524 maps ... show Tenochtitlan at center, as a porous disk surrounded by a larger ring of water... canals thread through the city” (Mundy, *The Death* 17). These watery encirclements—half red, half black in symbolic depictions—mirror the city’s geography and resonate with what might be considered the first image of La Llorona: a liminal figure traversing and haunting water-bound thresholds. For Mundy, “while rulers can die, spaces cannot... spaces endure” (10), meaning the aquatic setting that birthed La Llorona’s story remains materially and symbolically potent even after political conquest.

Doreen Massey’s relational framework positions the geographies La Llorona inhabits as the result of ongoing social production. As she observes, “We are always, inevitably, making spaces and places. The temporary cohesions of articulations of relations, the provisional and partial enclosures, the repeated practices which chisel their way into being established flows, these spatial forms mirror the necessary fixings of communication and identity” (Massey 347). La Llorona’s story emerges from such repeated practices—oral retellings along riverbanks, ceremonial gatherings, and warnings passed through generations—each inscribing motherhood, grief, and danger into the very landscapes she haunts. Yet these geographies are not neutral. “The challenge of the negotiation of place is shockingly unequal” (Massey 334), particularly

in colonial Mexico, where Indigenous women's narratives were reframed within European moral economies. This asymmetry reflects what Massey calls "a failure of the imagination of coevalness" (343), denying "the 'others'... a life of their own" and instead fixing them into prescribed temporal and cultural roles. Within this framework, La Llorona's rivers are not static symbols of loss but contested, living spaces where Indigenous memory, gendered violence, and folklore remain in motion. In Massey's terms, the rivers and plazas La Llorona haunts are not fixed backdrops but spaces continually made and remade through power, memory, and embodied practice. These contested geographies do more than hold her story—they actively shape her form. It is in the uneven negotiation of place, where Indigenous women's narratives have been reframed through colonial lenses, that La Llorona's liminality emerges.

La Llorona emerges as a liminal figure whose presence—like water itself—exists between binaries: life and death, mother and monster, sacred and profane. Victor Turner defines "liminality" as "liminal personae ('threshold people') [that are] necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space" (95). Liminal personae refer to individuals who occupy the liminal state, suggesting a threshold between them. Those experiencing the liminal state are characterized by ambiguity because they exist outside of the usual classifications of a specific cultural role or position. In other words, during liminality, individuals are not easily categorized within the established cultural norms or roles. They exist in a state of transition, outside the usual societal frameworks, which makes them difficult to define or categorize. Turner further infers that "liminal entities ... may be disguised as monsters, wear only a strip of clothing, or even go naked, to demonstrate that as liminal beings they have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or role, position in a kinship system" (95). Consequently, La Llorona exists in this liminal space where her entity or ethereal persona lingers between life and death. La Llorona is constantly put through a dichotomy of mother and monster, life and death, body and spirit. Death serves as a liminal space personified through the legend and materialized through bodies of water. José Carlos Rovira and Eva Valero Juan explore the sanctity of water through the parallels of La Llorona and Cihuacoatl:

El análisis de [La Llorona] demuestra que ejerce una importante función persuasiva pues es quien, mediante prácticas de seducción, e incluso pérdida de conciencia, 'cambia la condición existencial de ebrios a abstemios después de sumergirlos en el agua o bien los conduce a la muerte tras precipitarlos a una barranca.' Tanya González, además, observa las coincidencias descriptivas entre la Llorona y Cihuacoatl (la 'mujer serpiente' que aparece en la crónica de Sahagún

y que realizaba acciones semejantes a las que se atribuyen a la Llorona en el discurso actual), y señala el significado que adquieren el agua y un ‘espacio sagrado’ como la barranca dentro de la cosmovisión del mundo prehispánico.¹ (22)

Rovira and Juan highlight La Llorona’s “función persuasiva,” noting how she can transform drunkards into sober men after immersing them in water or leading them to death by plunging them into a ravine. Water here operates as more than a physical element—it is an “espacio sagrado” that, like the barranca, transforms the human condition. Tanya González observes that these acts echo those of Cihuacoatl, the “mujer serpiente” in Sahagún’s chronicles, who carried out similar deeds and whose presence was deeply tied to sacred water. Within this frame, water becomes a maternal force: It cleanses and renews yet can also engulf and reclaim. To be immersed in it is to undergo a passage—whether towards sobriety, death, or rebirth. The barranca, like the river or lake, thus serves as a maternal threshold, holding the dual capacity to nurture life and to draw it back into the earth-mother’s embrace. La Llorona’s presence in these waters enacts a geography of motherhood, calling her “children” home through cycles of creation and dissolution.

The sacred waters and barrancas where La Llorona dwells are not only thresholds between life and death but also reservoirs of memory, holding within them the stories, traumas, and identities of the communities who inhabit their shores. Elizabeth Jelin reminds us that memory is not a static object to be extracted; rather, it is produced by active subjects who share a culture and ethos. Although Jelin focusses on memory through the lens of dictatorships in Latin America, her reading of memory and the politics of struggle that exist in memories of historical injustices, trauma, and collective identity resonates with the bodies of water where La Llorona transgresses. The memory of the legend is thus produced by the lake of Tenochtitlan—a continuous active subject—and the people who continue to keep the legend alive. At the cusp of a liminal and sacred space, La Llorona becomes an artifact. Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello’s notion of the “global imaginary” suggests that certain objects, far from being simply items of consumption, become vessels that materialize distant worlds and environments (117). While they focus on porcelain objects from China that enabled Europeans to imagine worlds beyond their own, La Llorona and the sacred waters she inhabits can be seen as part of this global imaginary. Water, or specific geographical sites like Tenochtitlan, serves as a portal between worlds—a transitional space saturated with cultural and historical significance, acting as a conduit for the collective memory and identity of Mexico.

The Mexica’s sacred imagination, as seen in depictions of Chalchiuhtlicue, the goddess of lakes, rivers, and storms, reveals the deep cultural connection between water, femininity, and danger. The *Florentine Codex* describes her as

a force that “killed men in water ... she made the water swirl; she carried men to the depths” (Mundy, *The Death* 43), echoing the lethal undertones of La Llorona’s maternal violence. Iconography shows her seated on a red stool with a torrent of water flowing forth, carrying two human figures swept away “as if in a flood” (Mundy, *The Death* 43). In these representations, water is both life-giving and destructive, a sacred geography that male rulers sought to tame through hydraulic works, “dominating a dangerous female space” (Mundy, *The Death* 45). La Llorona’s association with rivers and lakes parallels Chalchiuhtlicue’s dual nature—calm in some depictions, unpredictable and deadly in others (Mundy, *The Death* 43). Her cry, like the swirling floods of Tenochtitlan in 1499, is a sonic and emotional deluge, pulling the living towards the depths. In this sense, La Llorona is not only a folkloric figure but a living embodiment of Mesoamerican water deities’ liminal and sacred power, carrying forward the intertwined legacies of motherhood, grief, and environmental reverence.

If Chalchiuhtlicue’s image embodies the visual and material representation of sacred waters, La Llorona’s voice renders that sacred geography audible. Here, the sound of her wailing—“¡Ay, mis hijos!” (Oh, my children!)—becomes an intangible yet enduring artifact, resonating across generations much like carved stone or painted codices. Oliver Douglas shows how material culture became central to folklore studies during the Victorian era, with oral accounts legitimizing the study of physical artifacts. Flora Dennis extends this to the emotional resonance of objects, focussing on a sixteenth-century handbell as a site where sound and memory converge. These scholars reveal how objects and immaterial experiences like sound carry emotional residues, linking the present with historical forms of perception and storytelling. La Llorona’s cry functions as a sonic artifact—material not in form but in impact. Her wailing, “¡Ay, mis hijos!”, resonates across generations as both warning and lament, embodying grief, rage, and cultural memory. Jonathan Sterne’s framework helps to situate this sound historically, reminding us that “the history of sound must move beyond recovering experience to interrogating the conditions under which that experience became possible” (28). La Llorona’s cry emerges from specific colonial and postcolonial conditions, where Indigenous women’s voices were reframed or silenced in dominant narratives. Her voice persists as an oral inscription that exceeds textual capture, functioning much like Sterne’s notion of sound recording’s “permanence” as a movement “from wish to practice to technological form” (27)—except here, the technology is the communal act of repeated telling, lodging her voice in cultural memory.

In this sense, La Llorona’s call to her children is not merely narrative—it is a maternal act of sonic reaching, a performance of motherhood across temporal and spatial divides. Sterne notes that sound’s “connection between sound,

subjective self-presence, and intersubjective experience” (18) positions it as a medium through which listeners feel themselves drawn into relational worlds. The cry’s address—“my children”—creates a collective subjectivity, making every listener a potential addressee, a surrogate child. This is where the emotional geography of La Llorona becomes most potent: Her sound courses through rivers, pueblos, and bodies, an “emotional geography” that binds place to feeling. Like Dennis’s handbell, which condenses sacred time and space in a single chime, La Llorona’s voice is both ephemeral and enduring—heard in the moment yet carried forward as a residue of historical grief. It is an auditory haunting that blurs the thresholds of life and death, past and present, mother and monster.

Furthermore, Stephanie Trigg and Anna Welch offer a useful lens through their exploration of how objects acquire emotional significance through embodied interaction. Drawing on Sara Ahmed, they argue that “relations between object and bodies ... take shape through tending toward objects that are reachable, that are available within the bodily horizon” (Trigg and Welch 3). They extend this into environmental discourse, urging us to rethink how bodies and landscapes shape one another across time, particularly through the framework of the Anthropocene. Though perhaps speculative, this approach invites us to consider whether the environment can engage the body reciprocally—much like the riverbank touched by La Llorona and she by it. And let us not forget the children drowned in the river, their bodies equally implicated in the emotional terrain. La Llorona’s legend is steeped in affective registers: grief, rage, sorrow, and madness, all inscribed onto the watery landscapes she haunts. Trigg and Welch’s notion that objects carry emotional residues—how people felt about them in the past, how they feel about them now, and how those feelings shift over time—resonates deeply with the study of folklore. Folklore, too, is a vessel of emotional transmission: It stores collective fears and longings, reshapes them, and passes them on. This emotional evolution is central to how legends like La Llorona endure.

While La Llorona emerges from Indigenous cosmologies of grief and rage, Ophelia and Imoinda offer early modern literary counterparts whose drowned or spectral bodies reflect colonial and gendered violence in different registers. Their stories converge through the motif of the weeping woman and diverge in how their voices are mediated or erased by patriarchal systems. This also relates to Dundes’s definition of folklore as a shared experience. Earlier, I proposed the question of folklore ascending from a shared cultural experience, particularly when considering motherhood and its intersection with the body and environment as a kind of folkloric terrain. We see this in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, when Ophelia drowns in a brook after descending into madness. Ophelia’s trajectory mirrors La Llorona’s, whose rage and sorrow lead her to drown her children and herself. Some scholars have speculated that Ophelia

might be pregnant, and if true, her watery death would resonate even more strongly with the trope of maternal loss and potential infanticide embedded in La Llorona's narrative. As her mind unravels, Ophelia sings, "Young men will do't if they come to't. / By Cock, they are to blame. / Quoth she, 'Before you tumbled me, / You promised me to wed'" (IV.5.60–63). Though ambiguous, this moment hints at a sexual relationship outside of marriage and possibly pregnancy—something that, as Lucile F. Newman observes, was capable of "conjuring up images of pollution in the mind of the hearer and suggesting a dramatic change in her character from a former state of purity" (228). The scandalous potential of Ophelia's pregnancy also intersects with what Mary Beth Rose describes as the "revolutionary implications" of female conceptions of motherhood, which were seen as logically incoherent to orthodox sensibilities and thus excluded from public representation (313). In this way, Ophelia's body—and the uncertainty surrounding her maternal status—becomes inseparable from the brook in which she dies, binding her to a broader folklore of maternal grief and watery death.

Gertrude's description of Ophelia's final moments transforms her drowning into an ecological tableau that merges woman and landscape. She begins, "There is a willow grows aslant the brook, / That shows his hoary leaves in the glassy stream. / Therewith fantastic garlands did she make / Of crowsfeet, nettles, daisies, and long purples" (IV.7.164–69). The willow—a recurring emblem of mourning—frames Ophelia's death within a feminine-coded ecology, much like the riverside haunting of La Llorona. Gertrude continues, "Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide, / And mermaidlike awhile they bore her up, / Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds, / As one incapable of her own distress" (IV.7.173–76). Her singing recalls La Llorona's cry: a sonic marker of grief, suspended between resistance and resignation. Yet Ophelia's immersion in the water is not salvific: "her garments, heavy with their drink, / Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay / To muddy death" (IV.7.179–81). Here, Rose's observation that "examining the drama's strategies of participating in certain sexual discourses while avoiding others can illuminate the process by which women's voices are marginalized in the transmission of texts" (314) underscores how Ophelia's death scene operates—simultaneously sensual, tragic, and silent about her possible maternal condition. Both Ophelia and La Llorona inhabit a liminal space where the maternal body and the natural world are entangled, their watery ends articulating a sacred, emotional grammar of loss transcending time, place, and cultural origin.

Through a similar lens, Imoinda in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* embodies a maternal figure whose body is marked by the violence of enslavement and displacement, echoing the spectral grief of La Llorona. Taken from her home and forced across the Atlantic, Imoinda undergoes a liminal passage in which

water functions not as renewal but as rupture. Although her death does not involve literal drowning, her transoceanic journey mirrors the same threshold crossing that defines *La Llorona*'s endless wandering along riverbanks. Behn's narrator recalls how "her Name, Grief wou'd get the ascendant of Rage, and he wou'd lye down by her side, and water her Face with showers of Tears" (61), a gesture that collapses her identity into a singular emotion. In this moment, Imoinda is not remembered for her thoughts or desires but as an object upon which Oroonoko projects his grief—much like *La Llorona*'s name is synonymous not with her life but with the loss that defines her. Both women are bound to waterways, their movements between spaces shaped by forces outside their control. In *La Llorona*'s case, the colonial and patriarchal systems cast her as both mother and criminal—in Imoinda's, the violence of the slave trade. Their grief moves through water, geography, and time, becoming what Simpson calls a form of "diasporic mobility" (196–97)—a maternal passage that resists disappearance by inscribing loss onto the land and water itself. In both cases, the maternal body is inseparable from the landscapes it traverses, and mobility becomes both a condition of dispossession and a mode of survival.

Yet Behn's narrative constrains Imoinda within the paradox of visibility and erasure. Early on, she is introduced as "the beautiful Black Venus" (Behn 14) and later as "the fair Slave" (Behn 38), labels that collapse individuality into iconography and render her legible only through the lens of European beauty standards and white desire. This aestheticization mirrors the way *La Llorona*'s image—mother, murderess, mourner—circulates stripped of historical specificity, her legend shaped by patriarchal and colonial narratives requiring her silence beyond the haunting refrain of "¡Ay, mis hijos!" In both cases, the woman's voice is reduced to a single expression of grief, erasing the complexities of her interior life. The culmination of this violence comes in Imoinda's stylized death scene, where she lays herself down "before the Sacrificer," and Oroonoko "gave the Fatal Stroke; first cutting her Throat, and then severing her yet Smiling Face from that Delicate Body, pregnant as it was with Fruits of tenderest Love" (Behn 61). Her maternal body is transformed into a still life—framed as beautiful, even serene—while the brutality of the act is subsumed into aesthetic climax. This dynamic exemplifies what Marisa Fuentes calls "mutilated historicity" (7), in which the traces of enslaved women survive only as already violated, objectified, and silenced. Though Imoinda is fictional, she occupies the same epistemic space as *La Llorona*: Both are maternal figures whose bodies are overwritten by narrative demands, their subjectivity sacrificed to sustain cultural, political, and moral orders. In both, motherhood is aestheticized as loss, and their grief is instrumentalized as a site where beauty, violence, and empire converge, ensuring that the woman remains present only as a symbolic body—haunted, haunting, and never entirely her own.

If the stories of Ophelia, Imoinda, and *La Llorona* reveal how the maternal

body becomes a symbolic site of loss, the waters La Llorona haunts show where that symbolism is anchored—a sacred, storied, and politically charged geography that remembers, resists, and records. Rivers, lakes, and riverbanks do not merely host her story; they shape it, carrying her voice across time and space. In particular, the lake of Tenochtitlan, tied to her earliest origins in pre-Columbian deities like Cihuacoatl, operates as both a spiritual and ecological site of loss, fertility, and resistance. In Indigenous cosmologies, as Mundy and Perdibon have shown, water is both generative and destructive, fluid and sacred. La Llorona embodies this duality, her body and voice extending from the river's edge to the archive, from ancient myth to colonial rupture. Her cry—"¡Ay, mis hijos!"—is more than lament; it is a sonic archive, a vessel of cultural memory that resists erasure. In its echo, we hear both the mourning of a mother and the survival of a people. She inhabits water as a liminal and sacred space, where ecological reverence meets histories of violence and where the living are called to remember. Through oral tradition, visual representation, and embodied geography, La Llorona persists—not as a static figure of folklore but as a living archive of loss, resilience, and resistance.

Even now, when I write her name, I feel her presence—mournful, unyielding. She is the mother I was warned about and the scholar I have become. Her cry has folded into my voice, reminding me that some stories do not end; they circulate, like water carried in the bone, moving through generations, demanding to be heard.

Endnotes

1. "The analysis of [La Llorona] demonstrates that she exercises an important persuasive function since she is the one who, through practices of seduction, and even loss of consciousness, 'changes the existential condition of drunks to abstainers after submerging them in the water or leads them to death after precipitating them into a ravine.' Tanya González also observes the descriptive coincidences between La Llorona and Cihuacóatl (the 'serpent woman' who appears in the chronicle of Sahagún and who carried out actions similar to those attributed to La Llorona in current discourse), and points out the meaning that water and a 'sacred space' such as the ravine acquire within the worldview of the pre-Hispanic world."

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Why Do We Blame Mothers?

Maternal Responsibility in Father-Daughter Incest Narratives, Research, History, and Gender Bias

This article interrogates notions of mothers' complicity in the sexual abuse of their children by their fathers. It seeks to understand their secondary trauma in relation to such abuse within the patriarchal confines of the family. As a psychologist and childhood survivor of sexual abuse, I interrogate societal tendencies to blame mothers for the behaviour of men who subject their children to such abuse. This prejudicial response has not softened despite increased understanding of the difficulties many women face—both practical and psychological—in wanting to leave an abusive situation, even when it impacts their children. My experience as a survivor of a family in which sexual abuse and violence perpetrated by my father impacted me, my mother, and my siblings informs my interest. In addition, as a psychologist, I am well equipped to interrogate the rippling affect/effect of misogynistic events in which daughters and mothers are put at odds and individually vilified. My research aims to gain a better understanding of the trauma suffered by maligned and vulnerable partners, women, and wives trapped in father-daughter abuse crises and their representation in certain narratives, my own and that of others. Implicit in this enquiry are the agency and wellbeing of survivor children.

This article explores the representation of mothers as accountable agents within families where father-daughter incest has occurred to demonstrate the extent to which mothers are blamed for situations of it, when occurring most often outside of their control. I write primarily from personal experience and as a practising psychologist. To this extent, my work is autoethnographic, using an informed, immersed first-person narrator to explore stereotypes and attitudes with universal significance. I do so to underscore the extent to which

the blaming of mothers in father-daughter incest occurs at subterranean levels, which abstract theory fails to encapsulate.

As much as any parent is responsible for the care of their children, in the past, mothers were often unfairly blamed for the incest, for failing in their responsibility towards their abused children, either through denial or through collusion with the perpetrators, as research from the 1990s and early 2000s into the role of mothers in father-daughter incest demonstrates. This at a time when prejudice arising from patriarchal pressures and misogyny was not so well recognized as today. But even today, as Michael Salter, Director of the Australian arm of Childlight, which undertakes extensive research on the impact of child abuse and exploitation, demonstrates, nonoffending women in situations of familial incest are still subject to harsh judgments, stigmatization, and isolation. This is more so, given the unspeakable nature of such offences. “How could he do it?” soon becomes “How could she let him do it?” The secret and unspeakable nature of incest leaves mothers unduly responsible, thereby distancing the perpetrator from full responsibility.

Incest happens in secrecy. It is private and flourishes under the cover of darkness. Once exposed, it can morph into blaming mothers for its existence. How much does this tendency to blame mothers for incest reflect the significance of mothers as the first port of call in our lives? When things go wrong, as they must inevitably do, mothers tend to be our first line of defence against pain. Mothers must help us, we believe, or they are held to blame for the fact that we are suffering. And mothers invariably fail us, as they must.

I grew up in an incestuous household during the 1950s and 1960s and recognize the powerful pressure of gender bias. Sigmund Freud’s theories, although questioned, still held sway—at least in the psychological world of my initial social work training, overloaded with gender discrimination, until the advent of second-wave feminism in the 1970s and beyond. Despite advances in this area, as Christina Risley-Curtis and Kristin Heffernan explain, mother blaming today “is as viable as ever, both in clinical journals and practice” (395).

The issue is also generational. Before no-fault divorce, women could not readily leave their abusive husbands without social and economic retribution. So, in many cases, they were forced to turn a blind eye to the abuse (Salter, personal communication, 12 Aug. 2025). Add to this the range of studies that demonstrate a “crossover between men who sexually abuse their children and men who perpetuate domestic violence” (Salter et al. 1, “Secrecy”). As Risley-Curtis and Heffernan argue, although the term “families” is used in discussions in research on the incidence of child maltreatment, the focus is “really on the mothers, regardless of whether they were the perpetrators” (396).

When I was a child, my father regularly visited my sister at night, in the bed opposite mine. I knew this was happening, but as an eight-year-old, I could

not make sense of it; I only wished it had not happened. I knew enough not to talk about it with anyone.

In the vast halls of my memory, it was some months, maybe years, before my mother caught my father in bed with my sister. She demanded he leave, or she would kill him. Fierce words from a woman who, for her entire marriage, tried to pacify the man as best she could. In this instance, she spoke firmly, but her words alone were not enough, and decades later, my sister told me, when our mother came to her some weeks after the confrontation to ask if our father was still visiting at night, my sister said he had stopped. He had not. My sister lied, she told me later, because she thought our mother was happier this way.

How do we unpack such stories? The adult me asks the questions: Why was my mother not more attentive? Why did she not stay awake and notice when her husband left their bed and stop him? At the same time, the adult me understands why my mother did not leave my father, even after she knew of the abuse. She had nine children in her care. He was the breadwinner. Her meagre income from working in childcare was never enough to support us all. Besides, she was raised Catholic, and to her, marriage was for life.

These days, both parents are dead, and much water has sluiced through, but my five brothers still blame our mother. Her daughters tend towards greater forgiveness, but not entirely. I wonder what I might do if my husband sexually abused one of our daughters. How to live with such internal dissonance? We could understand better the difficulties of mothering children in a world that expects us as mothers to give up everything for our family by unpacking the societal pressures that deny the vulnerability of women trapped in such situations. My story offers a clear illustration of the extent to which mothers are often unfairly blamed for father-daughter incest, even when they, too, were helpless against it.

Mothers Are Primary Carers and Are Therefore Held Responsible

In Elizabeth Strout's novel, *Olive Kitteridge*, there comes a moment when Olive learns that her adult son is in therapy. In response, she turns to her husband, "You're not to worry about that, Henry. In therapy they go straight after the mother. You come out smelling like a rose, I'm sure" (278).

Even as Strout writes tongue-in-cheek, Olive Kitteridge is right. We go for mothers. In my work as a psychotherapist, I often explore the nature of the relationship between the people with whom I work and their parents, especially their mothers. I suspect this goes back to my original training in object relations theory, a school of thought within psychoanalysis that emphasizes the ways early relationships with caregivers shape our subsequent behaviour and experience.

Those who study early infant attachments explore the multiple dimensions

of a child's connection to their parents through their internal representations. Attachment theory argues that our early experiences with caregivers influence not only how we feel and behave in childhood but also how they affect our relationships, behaviour, and experience into adulthood. Mothers typically provide initial primary care. And we tend to hold them responsible for what happens to their children, even when the environment and their fathers, including significantly abusive parental partners, bear down on them.

It began with Freud after he reversed his theory and recognized the extent of childhood sexual abuse. Several young women in his care had reported instances of incest, but he shifted his focus to argue that the "hysteria" of the child who is sexually abused by a parent or close relative has more to do with repressed sexual desires towards the parent of the opposite sex than with any experience (205). In other words, each child struggles with their own incestuous desire and grapples with the tension of their burgeoning sexuality instead of being traumatized by the experience of sexual abuse at the hands of caretakers. As Joanne Erhmin observes, psychiatric nursing textbooks first referred to parental sexual abuse of a child as "incestual longing" in 1977, and in that same year, it was first listed as a sexual crime in such textbooks, with "maternal deprivation ... also [being] identified" (255).

Sandor Ferenczi sought to revise Freud's notions in a 1932 paper. He describes how the introduction of sexuality too soon into a child's life can destroy their capacity to make meaning of their experience. He was discredited at the time. Children seek tenderness, Ferenczi argues, not adult passion, but perpetrators can confuse their own desires for those of the children. As such, the abusive father might claim he is doing it for her good, while exploiting his child's body for his own sexual gratification. And his wish for dominance.

As much as there is value in exploring the nature of attachment in infancy, the tendency thereby is to focus on the maternal connection to the infant, with scant regard to the role of fathers. How much must this colour and feed the prevailing view that mothers are the first port of call for children? If something goes wrong, it becomes the mother's fault, even when a father is sexually abusing said child. Even when he is the perpetrator.

As studies into gender bias in welfare indicate, women "are usually held responsible for the nurturing of all family relationships, not just the mother-child relationship" (Risley-Curtiss and Heffernan 399). And as Risley-Curtiss and Heffernan argue, when it comes to managing the father-child relationship, "the entire focus ... was on actions 'taken' or 'not taken' by the women in the study" (399). It is as if the mother is an accomplice to the crime or, worse, she is seen to be responsible for it. However, as Salter and colleagues argue, "Men who engage in CSAM [child sexual abuse material] and child sexual offending in family settings are under-studied" (16).

How much does this dynamic emerge from patriarchal discourse? How

much does it twist the narrative? As Neige Sinno, whose memoir *Sad Tiger* reflects on seven years of childhood sexual abuse at the hands of her stepfather, writes, “Powerful men, dictators, or even simply people who want more power ... will use any argument they can find. They don’t need to invent contexts to suit them, every crisis is good, every absence of crisis is good, everything can be turned in their favor” (45). Sinno’s stepfather—like other child sexual abuse perpetrators, including my own father—took it upon himself to speak in the language of self-justification. He was doing it for his stepdaughter’s sake, he told her. To prepare her for a life with men. He came from a repressed religious family where no one ever talked of such matters, so as a young man, he had endured the embarrassment of a first girlfriend mocking him for his sexual ineptitude. He told his stepdaughter he did not want her to share this experience. So, he educated her in all things sexual throughout her early years (Sinno 43).

My father took a similar line with my elder sister, blaming his behaviour on our mother’s repressed Catholic upbringing: her prudery in their marital bed and our mother’s ineptitude in sexually pleasuring him, as he believed she ought. This meant he needed to educate my sister in all things sexual before she came of age to prepare her for marriage, for example, stretch her vagina to make it ready for her husband-to-be. Essentially, he blamed our mother for abusing their daughter. However, as Salter argues, “The old explanation for incest on the basis of maternal frigidity is just straightforward medical misogyny” (Salter, personal communication, 12 Aug. 2025).

In the prevailing ethos of the early twentieth century, mothers are the ones who are supposed to provide sexual relief, and if they fail, and their husbands turn towards their daughters, it must be because of the mother. The shadow of such notions hangs over us more than a century later. For example, “mankeeping,” a term coined by sociologists Angelica Ferrar and Dylan Vergara, refers to the extent to which, as Kate Manne describes, a woman

“is expected to provide for all [their male partner’s] social needs—simultaneously playmate and drinking buddy and intimate partner—or arrange that his social needs otherwise get met by managing his calendar and reminding him to call his friends and family members.” (Manne). All of this is outside the issue of sexual abuse of children, but it speaks to what Manne refers to as “male entitlement,” a primary feature in the sexual abuse of children. Some fathers believe it is their right to use their children as they choose, which is the ultimate sense of entitlement.

Towards the end of the last century, when scholars began to explore the role of mothers in father-daughter incest, the emphasis was on how such mothers had failed their daughters, primarily through passivity. The mother did not

know or did not want to know, even when the abuse happened in secrecy under the cover of darkness, and no one told her about it, not her husband or her child. She should have known and stopped it.

Why do we blame mothers for our unbearable experiences, going back to our infancy and beyond? Is it built around the fact that most of us spent approximately nine to ten months housed inside the body of this person? We were once treated as one, until birth. This woman nurtured and cared for us in utero and then went with us through the rigours of labour as we entered the world, and, hopefully, at the end of that first huge trial, she was there to attach to as best we could, as best she could, to form an inextricable bond that stays in our psyches for the rest of our lives.

When she was dying, in her ninety-fourth year, my mother called out to her own mother, “Mama, where are you? I need you.” She had told me earlier that her relationship with her mother was distant, until in her final days, when she called out for maternal comfort. This is suggestive of the extent to which we carry our mothers with us in our bones and sinews, in our memories and psyches. They are the hallmark of our deepest dependency needs, our needs for closeness, our hunger, and our thirst.

Mothers were there at the get-go, if only for a short time, and thereafter a form of them holds fast in our memories and imaginations, both to sustain us in hard times or become a source of resentment at their neglect. The renowned psychoanalyst, Donald Winnicott, who dedicated his life to understanding what he called the “ordinary mother,” felt oppressed by his own mother, Elizabeth Martha. He spoke of his childhood experience as trying to make a living “keeping his mother alive” (qtd. in Minsky 134) and to help her with her underlying depression. She was prone to dark moods, while his father was seen to be inspirational. How much did this experience inform his research focus?

Winnicott’s work explores the mother-child bond, and like other mother-oriented therapists, he designed “studies in which families are rarely observed or seen at night when fathers might be present” (Risley-Curtiss and Heffernan 260). The father is often eliminated from such studies. In his paper “Hate in the Counter-Transference,” a classic in psychoanalytic studies and focussing on therapists’ sometimes hostile feelings towards their patients, Winnicott lists ten reasons why mothers hate their babies. In this paper, he explores the extent to which mothers teach their babies to hate; the implication again is that it is the mother’s fault whenever ambivalence or animosity enters the picture. Our infantile wish might well be for an unconditionally loving mother, with no needs of her own to conflict with our needs and desires, a need for what he calls the “good enough” mother (Winnicott, *The Child* 173).

But mothers are never good enough, it seems, when it comes to situations of childhood sexual abuse. Months before her death, my mother wrote a letter that she asked my elder sister to copy and circulate to every one of her children.

My sister and I responded to this letter. My younger sisters might likely have done so, too, but as far as I know, not one of my brothers responded to our mother's heartfelt plea to forgive her for the mistakes she had made.

I once blamed her, too, for not protecting us better—for not leaving the man she had married as a twenty-two-year-old woman in Haarlem, Holland, during the Second World War. A man, she later told me, she had married for his intellect and good looks, especially in uniform. A man of whom her parents disapproved because he was not Catholic and came from a less respectable family than theirs. But my father agreed to convert, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Why did my siblings, especially my brothers, refuse to respond to my mother's request for forgiveness? Why did they leave her stewing in her guilt for something the man she married did in his drunken rages, especially to my elder sister?

After I finished reading my mother's autobiography, which she wrote when she was in her early seventies, the age I am now, I, too, condemned her tendency to slide over what she once described as "the grotty bits." Like her sister-in-law, my father's sister, presumably also sexually abused by her father, my grandfather, my mother did not want the story to be aired. She seemed content to take the rap for her husband's behaviour.

In her feminist perspective on a tendency to blame mothers in nursing, Erhmin cites research describing the mother in abusive households as "a weak, passive woman who may be physically or emotionally incapacitated" (254), even as there is ample recognition that "incest is a crime of dominance" (253). And so, throughout the literature, mothers are portrayed as holding pathological personality traits that directly or indirectly lead to and somehow justify sexual assault (McIntyre 462)—a theoretical blaming of the victim.

Given their role as primary carers, mothers are thereby held responsible in situations of father-daughter incest to maintain the prevailing view that they should have known and stopped it from happening in the first place or at least put a stop to it once it had happened. This implies that nonabusive mothers are as culpable as the perpetrators for not saving the child and family from the incest.

Patriarchal Prejudice Gives Rise to Unfair Assumptions and Misogynistic Tropes

Past literature is riddled with sexist and patriarchal assumptions that scapegoat mothers for the sins of their husbands. Social worker Kevin McIntyre explores the history of our perception of the role of mothers in father-daughter incest and the extent to which incest in families was said to emerge only in dysfunctional family settings (462). Again, incest happens to reduce tensions

within families where mothers are not fulfilling their role as wives and mothers, particularly in the realm of sexuality, when mothers, like my mother, were not giving their husbands all the sex they wanted. Or perhaps again—as in the case of my mother, who was on and off pregnant, twelve times over the course of more than twenty years, from the time she was twenty-two to her mid-forties—they were too preoccupied for constant sex. How sexually available could my mother have been to my father, who believed sexual gratification was his right?

McIntyre writes about how the literature describes two types of women in cases of incest: those who do not know and are considered passive, and “active” partners, called silent partners, who knew about the incest but did nothing about it. He quotes historian Joseph J. Peters on the “unconscious vicarious pleasure by the woman partner as she witnessed her husband’s loss of sexual control” (qtd. in McIntyre 462). Other women, Peters argues, “received voyeuristic stimulation” (qtd. in McIntyre 462). Or as hinted at in my own family, there is the mother who puts “the child in bed between herself and her husband to buffer his sexual advances.” (qtd. in McIntyre 462). It is as if the mother triggered the sexual assault. Either they found relief from the demands of their role as wife and mother by allowing their daughters to meet their husbands’ unmet sexual demands, or, worse still, they took vicarious pleasure in seeing their daughters abused by their fathers—a perverse form of voyeurism and sadism. Such “active” mothers were vilified as dysfunctional in their inability to maintain a good and loving protective maternal role. McIntyre also refers to misogynistic notions within past research of mothers who fail in their maternal roles and thereby facilitate the abuse. “Fighting the boredom, disappointment, and lack of personal fulfillment that accompany the traditional maternal role, mothers who turn to new interests, whether through work or education, or other means, are depicted as selfish, irrational and irresponsible—fleeing from their emotional duties at home. (McIntyre, 463)” The implication: How dare women seek a life beyond motherhood? Those career driven women who care only for themselves and therefore neglect their children and spouses must in part be responsible for the abuse. The message, McIntyre argues, is that when incest occurs, no matter what mothers do, they will be seen to be contributing, whether directly or indirectly, thereby deflecting attention away from the perpetrator.

The statistics on such maternal behaviours also remain unclear, given the dearth of research and the unspoken nature of the incest taboo until more recently, when awareness reemerged under the impact of the #MeToo movement. But this movement against sexual violence more broadly has failed to delve deeply enough into the ubiquity of incest, even as it alerts us to our societal tolerance of misogyny and the oppression of women everywhere.

Seen through an historical lens with its patriarchal focus on the days when

women were primarily seen as their husbands' possession, as were their children, misogyny holds fast. Women were helpless to put a stop to sexually abusive behaviour to this day, as many women still fall victim to abusive husbands who coerce and control. As Judith Herman argues, we cannot understand incest without understanding "male supremacy and female oppression" (*Father* 191). How much are tropes, such as the "seductive daughter" and the "collusive mother" in father-daughter incest, convenient by-products of male hegemony? (Coulborn Faller 130).

In 1997, Jennifer Freyd coined the acronym DARVO, the way in which abusers deny, attack the person who confronts, and then reverse the victim-perpetrator position. She spoke to the struggle for women in situations where they are abused and then blamed for the abuse, as happened to my mother (22–32). Salter's research demonstrates the extent to which, in such situations, most mothers and partners are secondary victims. Five years earlier, Freyd took her father to court, claiming he had sexually abused her as a child. He fought the charges and won. Then, with his wife Pamela, her father established the False Memory Syndrome Foundation in the United Kingdom, an organization arguing that therapists can implant false ideas of abuse in the people with whom they work. Its sister organization in the United States was led by another couple, Lutheran minister Ralph Underwager and his wife, Hollida Wakefield. Underwager's daughter, likewise, accused her father of sexual abuse. He, too, was successful against her in court but was later found to be sympathetic to pedophiles. The Foundation was soon disbanded (Hinshelwood 149–65).

False memory arguments fuel the vast pedophile network that operates behind the scenes (Salter et al., "The Child"). It, too, seeks to vilify any woman who tries to protect herself or her children against the cruel consequences of misogynistic attitudes blaming women for everything that goes awry. Salter and his colleagues illustrate the consequences for mothers in their research into the effects on women when they realize their partner is a child sexual abuse offender, including fathers who sexually abuse their own children or through noncontact means in the collection of child sex abuse material in pedophilic pornography (Salter et al., "You Feel" 890). One interviewee from their research, after learning of their husband's use of child sexual material, tried to make sense of her husband's betrayal, which was underscored by the knowledge that he had also abused their daughter: "It was everything, everything—where do I live, what do I do, how do I deal with people, where do I put this? Is there shame, is there blame? There are lots of things that initially you don't even think of for yourself because you're so worried about your children and where you're going to live and what you're going to do" (Salter et al., "You Feel" 900).

The world is organized according to power, not justice, as Kate Hamilton

writes. And as a rule, men have more power. In her book *Mad Wife*, Hamilton addresses these issues and describes her experience of marriage to a man who in the early days of their life together, before children, had a dream romance, of love, of sex and companionship. But after their sons were born, her husband became possessive in an understated way and could not bear to go for long without the reassurance of sex with his wife. She relented most of the time, but over time, she made it clear to him that she did not enjoy the endless repetition of their sexual life.

In reading Hamilton, I am reminded of my mother on Saturday afternoons, as she took my father to bed purely for the sake of sparing us children his presence. And Hamilton, too, endured her husband's sexual demands even as she came to despise the experience. In time, Hamilton's husband urged his wife into a life of swinging with other couples to revive their sex life. Hamilton followed her husband through this, and in part, she claims she enjoyed the experience, but when she became too close to one of the other couples, he objected.

Mad Wife is the story of a woman's long struggle to leave her husband. He cannot bear to be with her any longer, but he cannot bear for her to leave. And once she does, he punishes her and their children mercilessly. But even in the courts, when she fights for custody of her younger son after his father begins abusing him, the court lawyers, psychologist, and judge rule in her husband's favour. This is evidence of misogyny writ large in their decision and distortion of her evidence. As a determined and educated woman, Hamilton is a threat. She needs to be put back in her place. On top of which, the police consider it the right of parents to punish their children, even to the point of cruelty, or so it seems to Hamilton when she seeks to save her son. She is held responsible for all the problems until she writes her book and declares her role in this story.

How her sons might judge her in years to come if they have the strength to read her book is anyone's guess. Again, is this why we tend to hold mothers responsible for our struggles? Their inability to hold us well enough? And in father-daughter incest, how much do we hold mothers responsible, even when they do not know their husband or partner is abusing their child in ways that contribute to what Leonard Shengold calls "soul murder" of that child? How does a mother live with the knowledge that her partner has sexually abused one or more of their children? This is a question that dogs the minds of those in this time of questioning the how and why of childhood sexual abuse. Our tendency to blame the mother. Think Alice Munro, the once-famed Canadian writer whose reputation is now tarnished after her death, when her third daughter, Andrea Skinner, revealed that her stepfather had crept into her room at night and sexually abused her as a child. Munro knew this by the time Andrea was twenty-five, and even earlier, hinted at this knowledge in her

stories, but still she stayed silent—seemingly the ultimate betrayal of a child (Smee). But it is complicated.

My mother also stayed with her husband long after it became clear he, too, was sexually abusing her eldest daughter for many years. In her book *No Matter Our Wreckage*, Gemma Carey explores this subject further when she realizes her mother knew she was sexually abused between twelve and sixteen by a friend several years her senior. He snuck into her house at night. Carey, as a twelve-year-old, imagined she was willing. Where is the consent here? The two, her abuser and she, exchanged letters, which her mother intercepted but failed to acknowledge. And Carey, who has since died an untimely death through complications of her chronic ill health and autoimmune disease, presumably induced through her childhood trauma, is testimony to the damage done. Why, when her mother knew, Carey asks, did she allow the abuse to continue? Why did she not put a stop to it? Carey also suspects her mother was abused as a child. The generational repeat.

My mother tried to stop it. The night she caught my father inside the bedroom I shared with my elder sister, he was hunched over my sister's body as she lay in bed—"like a little bird with frightened eyes," my mother told me years later. My mother wanted to believe his abuse had stopped. She had no idea of the power of alcohol and my father's own history of sexual abuse at the hands of his father, my paternal grandfather: a man I never met.

On her side, in her memoir, which my mother wrote twenty years before her death, she describes an incident in which word came from her father, my *Opa*, an exemplar in the Catholic Church in Haarlem, that the people from the St Vincent de Paul Society were in search of new baby clothes for a thirteen-year-old girl who was pregnant to her father. My mother, by then herself a young mother, offered the girl clothes from her collection. She marvelled at the tragedy of such an event, some forty years before her own husband was sexually abusing her daughter. Why this gap in her knowledge? Why this disconnect between the tragedy of a young woman who carried a baby born of incest and my sister, who did not fall pregnant to my father but still suffered under the weight of his sexual advances? Which I did, too, vicariously.

When I grew into young adulthood and first studied as a social worker, I was furious with my mother for her decision to stay with my father. He had abused her, too, both physically and mentally, but still she stayed. I had not yet read Jess Hill's book, *See What You Made Me Do*. I did not understand why it was so dangerous and difficult for a woman to leave her husband, no matter the levels of abuse directed towards her or her children.

Patriarchal pressures, which can leave women stuck in unequal and often coercively controlling relationships, feed the notion that when children are sexually abused by their fathers, mothers are to blame for not taking greater care of them and for not resisting misogynistic claims they are fully responsible

for the upkeep of their households; therefore, they should have known and put a stop to such abuse, even when their inferior and somewhat servile state makes it almost impossible to withstand such often hidden control.

The Secret Unspeakable Nature of Incest Leaves Mothers Responsible and Thereby Distances the Perpetrator from Full Responsibility

Why do we blame mothers for not taking care of their children better in incest families? It is as if somehow the active participant in the process, the perpetrator of said abuse, is less the culprit than the woman who stands by helplessly. My mother believed that her strong words to my father that night—the strongest words I have ever known her to offer, words of protest—would be enough to stop him in his tracks and protect her daughters.

Before she died, my mother wrote a separate letter to my elder sister, who was the direct victim of my father's sexual abuse. Though indirectly, there is enough evidence to suggest all my father's children, but especially his daughters, suffered under his advances—my brothers, for the confused role model he provided, and for my sisters and me, the fact that the possibility of our abuse as next in line haunted us throughout our childhoods.

My mother never left my father for good before his death at sixty-five. As a child, when I wanted her to stay away for good, I put it down to her Catholicism. My mother left my father several times temporarily during my childhood, at one time for a full year when my younger siblings and I decamped with her to a rental near the beach in Parkdale. An older brother had arranged this during my final year of schooling, one of the happiest years I remembered, free of my father's threats during the nights. But my mother could not stay away. She pined for him. She lost weight. And sometimes, unbeknownst to us, she went back to Cheltenham at night to the family home, where our father remained, to check on him. Her guilt was so powerful to see him abandoned.

Why our father should introduce all of us, sons and daughters alike, to the passions of sexual desire before we were equipped to handle it remains an unanswered question. And even though my mother knew before she married him that his own father had been jailed for *Ontucht*, old Dutch for sexual licentiousness—most likely incest given my aunt, my father's nineteen year old sister brought the charges in 1942—it is as if it never occurred to my mother the same thing might happen under his care to her own daughter. The generational repeat.

I once thought my mother was gutless for not leaving my father for good, as in my mind then, she should have. I see it as far more complex these days. Her decision to stay with an abusive husband was complicated—like Munro's decision to stay with her second husband and the decision of countless women everywhere to stay with abusive partners even when these men have so

thoroughly dishonoured themselves and their children by sexually abusing them.

The problem is greater than my story. It is systemic. It goes back to societal structures making it almost impossible for women to leave their abusive husbands while also failing to address the needs of abusive men, who, as Jess Hill suggests, cannot bear the weight of their own shame at their needs and dependency, so they lash out on those most vulnerable, their children, as a source of relief from their frustration. Some breach the bounds of human decency, the incest taboo, and approach their child as if she's an adult by imposing their sexual desires on her. They introduce her to adult passion when, as his child, she seeks only tenderness and care. As Ferenczi argues, the child, like her mother, is muddled about her position in the scheme of family. What position does she hold except as her father's secret concubine? Her position in life is to gratify him in return for care, a type of Stockholm syndrome, where we form attachments to our abusers in the belief that they alone can keep us safe.

Salter writes about situations of prolonged sexual abuse when women are held prisoner by their fathers, either literally or through psychologically coercive means. He offers the story of Grace to help us understand better "the interplay of familial, social, and political factors that entrap girls and women within prolonged incestuous abuse" (Salter 146). In these situations, women are imprisoned for prolonged periods, such as the notorious case of Josef Fritzl, who held his daughter, Elisabeth Fritzl, as a prisoner in a hidden bunker under the family home for twenty-four years. In this instance, the mother, Rosemarie Fritzl, denied knowing anything about the abuse. Salter cites several other such cases, which, because of their sensational nature, garnered worldwide attention. The women's imprisonment was often a function of emotional control and coercion "rather than iron bars and locked doors" (Salter, 146). And in such instances, media treatment has often been neglectful or ambivalent. There is also an expectation, following such prolonged ordeals, that these women will not be able to function as capable human beings. This takes us back to the notion that victims must appear as such. Otherwise, they are seen as complicit somehow, and mothers in such situations are also implicated.

To give an example of common responses to such situations, a comment was posted on Reddit about the Fritzl case and the mother's involvement: "Do you think Rosemarie Fritzl knew of her husband's crimes? He was convicted of raping others while he was married and served 12 months out of an 18-month sentence. They also had a tenant living in their home on the ground floor for 12 years or something???" ("Do You Think"). Either she did not know, keeping her head in the sand, or she knew and was an accomplice. The lack of empathy and understanding of the complexity of such situations is telling. As Herman

states, “A man’s home is his castle; rarely is it understood that the same home may be a prison for women and children” (*Trauma* 72).

There was once an essentially biological view that women unconsciously selected their partners for the value of their genetic make-up to assist in the reproduction of children. This view ignores the complex interplay of biology and human constructions of personhood over time. With the introduction of contraception, women no longer need to hunker down to a life of domestic drudgery. So, the picture is more complex.

But the shadows of the past remain. With women still the second sex, and children collateral damage, is it the fault of mothers who could not protect their children from patriarchy, which, as Hill argues, positions people on an entitlement spectrum, with white men at the top? As Hill writes, “We are born longing for connection, for tenderness, to love and be loved. Patriarchy seeks to override those aural feelings in boys—to literally sever their capacities for emotional connection—by rendering those feelings weak and shameful” (112).

Is this not the essence of the sexual abuse of children? The projection of pain onto the smallest one, which can then make us feel bigger because we cannot handle our own vulnerability? Certainly, my father could not handle his. And my mother went out of her way to help him with it, in unhelpful ways that then enabled him. Could she have behaved differently, given the lack of support within her church and community, given the secrecy that surrounds incest generally, and given the fact that she had no money or power? How could she indeed? The unspeakable nature of incest leaves mothers more responsible than they are, thereby distancing perpetrators from the need to take responsibility. This feeds our societal failure to understand more what drives incest in the first place, not as the fault of mothers but as an issue of patriarchal power and control. This reality leaves children even more vulnerable in the face of abusive fathers.

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VERÓNICA ROBLES-GARCÍA, RENÉE DEPALMA, ANTÍA PÉREZ-CARAMÉS, AND VERÓNICA VERDÍA VARELA

Transnational Mothering of Children with Disabilities: The Experience of Nicaraguan Caregivers and Professionals

Children with disabilities in developing countries live in complex situations; they face difficulties accessing basic resources, and their fundamental rights are rarely considered. Our study aims to describe the social, educational, and healthcare context of children with disabilities in Nicaragua and to determine factors conditioning their wellbeing by exploring families' and professionals' perspectives. Twenty-two representatives from the health, educational, and community service sectors and twenty caregivers of children with disabilities living in the Las Segovias region of Nicaragua participated in semistructured interviews. These comprised open-ended questions about the services provided for children with disabilities and particular experiences related to their care. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Two independent coders conducted framework analysis on the transcripts. Representatives from the service sectors identified challenges facing caregivers of children with disabilities, highlighting how economic and social vulnerability in rural areas contributes to their specific needs. Public services do not cover the multidimensional needs of these children. Mothers provide economic support and rely on informal networks of care. However, mothers' situations of migration and poverty, combined with service deficits in rural environments, aggravated the social exclusion experienced by these families. Caregivers were women who had few supports for caring for children with complex conditions throughout their lifespan.

Introduction

In this article, we address practices and resources available for caring for Nicaraguan children with disabilities in the absence of their mothers. It presents some of the results of the research project “Child Diversity, Society, and Maternal Migration in Nicaragua: Articulating Networks” (DISEMINAR). The research was carried out between 2017 and 2018 by a multidisciplinary team led by the principal investigator, Verónica Robles García. The overall project set out to explore transnational mothering of children with disabilities. To understand this phenomenon from a variety of perspectives, we interviewed migrant mothers, family members entrusted with the care of migrant women’s children (usually mothers or sisters of the migrants themselves), and key actors in education and community social support settings in the country of origin. In this article, we explore the local context in the country of origin, focussing on interviews with Nicaraguan caregivers and actors representing the social service network designed to support the needs of these children.

The article is situated within the literature on transnational families, more specifically transnational motherhood, which has developed over the last two decades, mainly in the field of migration studies. One of the gaps in the literature is the approach to transnational care in the case of children with special needs, an issue that we analyze in detail in this contribution. It is also rare to analyze both ends of the global care chain: the transnational mother and the left-behind relatives who take care of the children in the country of origin, which is a valuable contribution to the study of transnational care for children with special needs.

Research Context

The feminization of international migration, particularly salient since the beginning of the twenty-first century, has led to the emergence of a line of research on transnational families and, in general, on how care is organized in the context of migration (i.e., how the social reproduction of migrants is articulated) (Kilkey et al.). In this context, analyses around transnational motherhood have addressed issues, including (among many others) the experience of migrant mothers, the transformation of roles and expectations around motherhood, and the wellbeing of children (Boccagni; Fresnoza-Flot; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila; Vives and Vazquez Silva). Nevertheless, the abundant corpus of existing research on the subject has failed to adequately take into consideration the diversity of children of migrant mothers, either in terms of age or, as in the case of this article, disability (Carling et al.).

Thus, few studies have addressed how motherhood in migration is carried out with respect to the care of children with disabilities. Within this literature,

many studies have focussed on migrant women who have their children with them in the destination country (see, for example, Rizvi; Sim et al.), rendering even scarcer studies involving children with disabilities who are left behind. Research on migrant mothers with children with disabilities in South Korea (Kim and Hwang), for example, highlights the double stigma to which they are subjected, both because of their children's disability and because they have migrated and failed to fulfil the duty of a good mother to stay by their child's side. These results seem to point to the need for an intersectional analytical approach to the study of migrant mothers of children with disabilities.

This tension between being reunited with their children with disabilities in the country of origin and having to provide for their livelihood and survival is also experienced by undocumented Latina mothers in the United States (US) (Cioè-Peña). As for the repercussions of maternal migration on the quality of life experienced by these children, some data have associated remaining in the country of origin with poorer mental health and even neglect (Yeoh and Lam). Some evidence suggests that the children of migrants who remain in the country have better health compared to the children of nonmigrants; however, in the specific case of children with disability, there is less.

Research on this topic has been conducted in diverse geographical contexts. For the case at hand, Nicaragua, it is a country with a medium human development index (0.669 in the year 2022) and with a care regime of low public investment and high dependence on the community work done by women (Franzoni and Voorend). Access to medical care and rehabilitation services for children with disabilities is limited (Matt). In this context, there has been an intense process of emigration with high female participation in recent decades.

Thus, according to the latest data available on the Migration Data Portal (International Organization for Migration) for the year 2020, Nicaragua has a stock of international migrants of more than seven hundred thousand people, representing more than 10 per cent of the country's total population. Women predominate in the Nicaraguan diaspora, representing 53 per cent of the total number of emigrants abroad. Although the most recent population census was conducted in 2024, detailed information is not yet available. According to the 2005 census, more than 10 per cent of Nicaraguan households had at least one member living abroad. The proportion of female-headed households is almost 25 per cent, and the share of households with a person with a disability is 7 per cent (Instituto Nacional de Información de Desarrollo). It is within this context that we explore the specific experiences and needs of children with disabilities, including those whose mothers have emigrated. We examine the situation from the intimate family domain, based on the caregivers' accounts, and the professional domain, based on the perspectives of community and social service workers.

Methodology

For this article, we draw upon two of the three datasets created as part of the overall project: interviews with Nicaraguan families who were caring for children with disabilities and interviews with people working in social service sectors especially relevant to the wellbeing of these children: healthcare, education, and community-based social assistance. This last sector consists of civic associations and even individual volunteers who help to cover economic and other needs of families who would have received public assistance in the presence of a stronger network of public services. All interviews were semistructured, drawing upon a predetermined template of topics to address for each group of informants but with the intention of allowing flexibility for people to expand on areas that they felt were relevant and interesting. Families were asked questions regarding their experiences of caring for a child with a disability, while social service workers were asked questions relating to their specific area of expertise and geographic area (e.g., regarding procedures followed, available resources, difficulties faced by families, and limitations to services provided).

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and then coded and analyzed using the software package Atlas.ti. A framework analysis approach (Gale et al.) was used to combine both deductive and inductive processes. In this sense, codes were initially structured to follow the themes addressed in the interview protocol designed to elicit personal experiences and anecdotes relating to our research questions. At the same time, emerging tendencies across interviews and unanticipated details were captured through emergent coding and memo creation. These were organized into the three main categories of needs, strategies, and resources, which are analyzed in this article from the differentiated but complementary positioning of families and service providers. All data were coded independently by two members of the research team, and intercoder reliability was established by identifying, discussing, and resolving any discrepancies and continually adjusting the codebook according to developing understandings.

Interviews were conducted in the Las Segovias region of northern Nicaragua in 2018. They were meant to be conducted by a research team consisting of a member of the university-based research team (at the University of A Coruña, in Spain) and a member of the Nicaraguan NGO ILLS (Leadership Institute of *Las Segovias*). This procedure was carried out for interviews with representatives of the public service sector, but we were forced to change our tactic for the family interviews as a result of the government crackdown on protesters in April of 2018, which eventually extended to attacks on independent media and NGOs (Human Rights Watch). These retaliatory measures included the shutdown of our partner NGO and active persecution

of the institute's founder (Haydee Castillo) and anyone else associated with the organization. Under these conditions, volunteers managed to discreetly complete interviews with families in the absence of the designated research team.

As for representatives of social service sectors, we interviewed twenty-two people, eighteen women and four men, representing health (five), educational (eight), and community service (nine) sectors. Using the technique of snowball sampling to identify persons most strongly affected by the factors we were investigating, these informants helped to identify the people interviewed for the second dataset, which consisted of a total of twenty people who were caring for a child with a disability. Children had been diagnosed with a range of physical and intellectual disabilities, including Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, hydrocephalus, autistic spectrum disorder, epilepsy, and a range of problems which the family member interviewed could not specifically name but did describe in terms of difficulties in hearing, vision, speech, mobility, and cognition. Many of these children had multiple diagnoses and difficulties.

Six of the caregivers interviewed were mothers caring for their own children, while fourteen of them were caring for someone else's child. In these cases, the mother had migrated and sent remittances to help offset the educational, health, and other costs of care. Six of these migrant mothers were in Spain, three of them were in Panama, one each was in Costa Rica and the US. The three remaining absent mothers were in a situation of internal migration, as they were employed in a distant region of Nicaragua, making it impossible to live at home. Only one of these caregivers was a man, the father of a child whose mother had migrated to the US. Of the thirteen remaining caregivers of children whose mothers were absent, it is relevant to note that all of them are either relatives or friends on the mother's side: the vast majority were grandmothers (eight), while three were aunts, and the remaining three were a cousin and a friend of the respective migrant woman. The social service representatives interviewed confirmed that the composition of our sample coincided with overall characteristics of these caring networks. While the migratory experience is not a focus of this article, and has been analyzed elsewhere (DePalma et al.), it is important to understand migration as an important factor in the lives of these families, providing one of the few viable economic strategies available for meeting the high costs of disability in a country with a weak public socioeconomic safety net.

Because of concerns expressed by participants that being interviewed as part of a project led by ILLS might lead to reprisals, we have taken precautions to avoid providing information that might lead to the identification of individuals or, where applicable, their affiliated organization. For this reason, direct citations of social service representatives are indicated only by their sector, and family members are represented by their familial relationship to the child.

Results

The Voices of Professionals

While the professionals we interviewed worked in different sectors (i.e., health, education, and community-based social assistance), we discovered a great deal of convergence in the issues they identified as challenges to the people caring for children with disabilities. Keeping in mind that these informants speak generally about the families using their services, we found that these characterizations coincided with the direct experiences described by the caregivers we interviewed, which we will describe in the following subsection.

Many professionals referred to the economic difficulties experienced by families living in the Central American “Dry Corridor”—a tropical dry forest region whose seasonal droughts have been exacerbated by climate change. Living conditions in this geographic area, characterized by high levels of food insecurity, have produced vulnerability for mothers raising children:

Most single-headed households in the Dry Corridor are headed by mothers, who are economically vulnerable and food insecure. Due to high levels of migration in the Dry Corridor, women experience an additional burden, as they have to undertake the agricultural activities of departed men on top of their traditional domestic responsibilities. (World Food Program USA)

Our data suggest that these difficulties are exacerbated when fathers fail to participate in the maintenance of the family, so that mothers are forced to take on a dual role of (absent) economic provider and carer. In these cases, they must rely on the goodwill and generosity of family members and friends to manage care.

Professionals described the Las Segovias region as a particularly impoverished area of Nicaragua, “The poorest places in all of Nicaragua are in the region of Las Segovias and the Caribbean coast. Of all the municipalities, I believe that more than 90 per cent are in a situation of extreme poverty” (Health 4). They attested to the extreme economic vulnerability of these families, especially those living in rural areas:

Community 7: There are two [main geographic areas]: the more rural area, which is where there is more poverty, and the ... urban [area]. In the rural area, there are limitations because it is a poor municipality with extreme poverty.

Interviewer: What do the people do? What do they do for a living? How do they subsist?

Community 7: We are a dry corridor. There is no water here. It is very dry, so it is difficult for them to plant something, and it can take all year, but there are stages. They plant, and they have enough for certain months, but poverty is... It has these limitations.

Professionals described specific needs of these children, including proper nutrition and basic living conditions:

It is better for these children to eat better. So these are some of the difficulties for these parents who have limited economic, material, educational and food resources. (Community 3)

When I went to visit them, well, [the children] were in a little cot ... without a mattress. (Community 7)

Many commented that women are generally unprepared for safe and healthy pregnancy and motherhood, which can lead to malnourishment and accidents attributed to unsafe conditions or inadequate supervision:

One of the problems that also exists in terms of the threat of a child with a disability is the lack of food because the mother is malnourished, vitamins, [and] minerals. (Community 2)

Maybe because some children fall early due to a lack of care, right? Children at an early age. Because it happens a lot. I have seen cases of children who have been fine as babies, and because of a fall, they have [problems]. (Community 3)

Some professionals specify risk factors related to disability that could be prevented with more information during pregnancy. For instance, one professional described a specific case where the mother had not been advised on the importance of folic acid to healthy fetal development, and her child was born with spina bifida and cognitive difficulties (Education 1).

These professionals also spoke of the stigma associated with having a disabled child, which in some cases may be an additional factor in limiting the quality of care or socialization the child receives:

Some people feel ashamed to take these children out. I knew of a case here where the child had a disability, and the mother never took him out. The child died, and she never took him out. They feel shame, or that [the child] is going to be rejected by the rest of the normal children, as we call them, or as people call them, right? Or that one is not going to take good care of them, or that they are going to be beaten. Fear, then, many times—fear, fear. (Education 5)

[One mother] walks around with one girl but doesn't take the other child out; there are even people who don't know that she has a child with a disability. (Community 1)

This guilt may exacerbate the already persistent problem of single-mother families, as it may place an additional strain on the potential paternal relationship: “When a child is born with a disability, the father blames the mother; generally, this is what characterizes children with disabilities, and in the end, it is the mother who is left working and supporting the child and sometimes alone she cannot take care of the child (Community 1). There was a great deal of consensus that the responsibility for caring for disabled children is largely that of the mother and her (usually female) informal support network, with all the economic vulnerability and lack of support associated with feminized practice:

[The responsibility falls] on the mother. And on the grandmothers. Another factor is that here most of the mothers, not only mothers with children with disabilities, but mothers... they are the ones raising their children because they are abandoned by their husbands. In other words, most of the households here are made up of only the woman. She is the mother and the father. There is no father figure. So, she is the one who has to go out to work. And this child is left in the care of the grandmother, if, thank God, the grandmother is present. (Health 3)

The mother [is responsible]. The mother. For example, when we have meetings, meetings with fathers and mothers, which are held monthly, it is the mothers who go. (AC Education 4)

In terms of solutions, professionals highlighted the need for education in many areas, including social awareness raising about disability and inclusion:

One of the main challenges for me is to achieve... inclusion, really, to achieve that children are... achieving their independence, their acceptance. But not so much from society as a whole but starting with the family itself. Because yes, sometimes I have seen, in my experience, sometimes I have seen some limitations in terms of... children with disabilities in the acceptance of their own family. (Health 3)

There are children, for example, that I have had with developmental delays, and I have seen that if we give them stimulation, the child advances and does not develop a disability. But if the mother does not stimulate the child, the child may become disabled. (Community 6)

Several professionals highlighted the need to provide parents (i.e., mothers) with specific guidelines in promoting the development of their children to minimize the impact of their disability:

[They should provide] stimulation so that the child learns to recognize, that the child learns to follow objects, to control the body, to recognize

sounds, to ... move.... [We] teach the mother how to position the child, how to feed the child, to offer the breast. We work with the mother and the child, and the therapy has to be followed at home so that the child can advance. (Community 1)

Some expressed concern that teachers did not receive specific preparation for working with children with disabilities: "In the school, [teachers] are not very trained; they don't learn anything, that the teacher needs to give more time to [the disabled] child... and so [they don't] do it. (Community 6)

However, some informants from the educational sector spoke of the possibility of receiving specific instruction, even though the examples offered suggested this was optional in-service training in response to specific professional needs that arise in the schools:

I took an online course; they urged us to take an online course. Sign language, they also prepared us for that. In other words, the students themselves make us prepare ourselves more. (Education 2)

So we have given [teachers] tele-classes; there is a program that we work on with tele-classes, on strategies, different strategies, how to attend to the students. (Education 4)

Community service workers in particular pointed to the importance of increasing funding that would enable them to provide adequate services to support the care of disabled children. These entities rely on fundraising via public telethons and specific grants from local government:

Scholarship recipients of educational assistance programs and the mayor's office.... There is funding from the mayor's office because this year they... how should I say, they gave a quota of fifteen thousand cordobas,¹ and in the community, ten thousand cordobas were collected. (Community 3)

I don't have resources. I don't have a salary to support me. When we do the work we do it voluntarily ... there is no budget. (Community 1)

The Voices of Families

The caregivers we interviewed, as mentioned above, were almost exclusively women. Whether the mothers cared directly for their children or whether they migrated and left the child in the care of a friend or relative, the father's involvement in his child's wellbeing was described from sporadic to complete abandonment. Relatives who cared for the children of the women who had migrated (either externally or internally) cited this lack of paternal support as yet another factor that instigated the maternal absence:

[The mother] left in December, not long ago, and because of the need to raise these children. Because the father abandoned them, he did not leave them with anything, not even a house, as another husband might have. (Grandmother of a child with a disability 5)

She works in Estelí taking care of a lady. She lives with her there. She decided to leave because of the need to go to work to support her children because they don't have their father's support. (Grandmother of a child with a disability 7)

Some interviewees also referred to paternal reticence (especially in terms of intimate care, such as bathing) or ignorance when it comes to caring for a person with a disability: "He treats her as if she were a newborn. Sometimes I get angry. Sometimes I find him feeding her, blowing on her food for her, mashing food. She can eat; she can hold things" (Mother of a child with a disability 1).

The only father we interviewed was helping to care for his own disabled child (with spastic palsy) while his ex-wife worked in the US. He described the maternal grandmother as the principal carer until she died about a year and a half before the interview took place. He told us that he travelled a lot for work, taking over the night-time care responsibilities when he was in town and helping on the weekends when he was away during the week. According to him, his wife wished to bring her son to the US to live with her, but has asserted his authority with respect to this prospect, arguing that she must first convince him that his son will be well-cared-for despite her irregular administrative status:

I told her once, "Once you prove to me that the child will be fine there, I will sign all the papers and leave [you] in charge of taking care of him, but first prove to me that the child will be fine, because first of all you are illegal and life is complicated for an illegal alien there, even to be moving around looking for help for a special child." (Father of a child with a disability)

Female relatives, particularly the children's grandmothers, were often cited as important support figures, even when the mother was the primary caregiver. At the same time, many pointed out that these aging women were sometimes limited by their own physical capacities:

It is true that when she comes, and I go to run an errand or go to class, my mom feeds her, but she doesn't move her because she can't hold her; it's because of [the child's] weight; she can't hold her. (Mother of a child with a disability 1)

[Laughing] We're going to be left alone [the child and me], just the ones who can no longer walk. (Grandmother of a child with a disability 7)

At the same time, especially among the mothers living in Nicaragua, we detected a tendency to criticize the mothers who did migrate, as this called into question a maternity defined in terms of physical care and affection:

They can't leave them alone because it's pitiful for children who are like that [with a disability] because as a mother, you have to take care of them. It is not good for Nicaragua ... I suggest that they are rude mothers who leave their children alone, and they cannot leave them alone. (Mother of a child with a disability 4)

I say it is rude because I have my child, and I am not going to leave her to go somewhere else, to have other ambitions and leave her alone. A child is not to blame. That's not good for the country. (Mother of a child with a disability 5)

Such sentiments create a social stigma for mothers who, on top of having to endure the separation from their children, are subject to blame and guilt for failing to assume the expected maternal role (DePalma et al.).

While most of the people caring for migrant women's children identified clear economic advantages—for example, "She [the child] would have died if she [the mother] hadn't left" (Grandmother of a child with disability 7)—there were exceptions to this perception, such as "[The money we receive] is barely enough for the child to eat" (Grandmother of a child with disability 3). Many people cited large debts (and interest) incurred before migrating and unexpectedly difficult travel and working conditions as factors that offset the benefit of migration.

When we asked caregivers about the broader system of social support, one mother expressed a reluctance to draw upon community resources: "No, but look, I am not that kind of person who takes refuge in [community organizations], because there are mothers who have children with disabilities and use them ... I have never used them" (Mother of a child with a disability 1). However, another comment by this same woman helps to contextualize this reticence, suggesting that the refusal to seek assistance from community organizations has more to do with the stigma linked to asking for charity. She went on to speak highly of less material assistance, such as information and education related to disability:

The talks they gave us helped. For a person to accept and know what they are doing, we have to first manage our emotions.... They worked with me on acceptance and the stages of grief.... Because, look, before I blamed the doctors [for the disability], and in this case, nobody is

guilty, because you know that things happen because they have to happen, and that nobody is guilty. (Mother of a child with a disability 1)

Other caregivers spoke of the negative consequences of the lack of education and information: “When they took him to the health centre, they said that this child was sic’, that’s all they said” (Grandmother of a child with a disability 6). Others spoke of the difficulty in recognizing and accepting the problem, which delayed the initial diagnosis and potential for early intervention: “When he was one month old, the child already had a problem, but she did not accept it” (Friend of the migrant mother of a child with a disability). Lack of financial resources and faith in the healthcare system was identified as an additional factor preventing families from seeking professional help: “We leave it to God’s will because financially we don’t have enough money to visit a doctor, and if we go to the health centres, they only give us acetaminophen.... We haven’t taken him to a doctor” (Grandmother of a child with a disability 5).

Others referred to the high cost of medicines and medical consultations. The lucky families could draw upon informal resources to defray or avoid these costs: “I take him to a friend here who has a clinic ... this doctor ... doesn’t charge for the consultations for these special children, [and] he does give me discounts on the medications” (Aunt of a child with a disability 2).

While the school may play a supporting role in detecting difficulties that have gone unnoticed by the family, there is also the risk of social and educational exclusion from the school system: “She was in a regular school, and they saw that she was not paying attention: the children were in class, and she was walking around. The teachers said that she could not be there because she was not doing anything, so they took her to the special school” (Grandmother of a child with a disability 1). For some children, lack of access to special education meant that they were excluded from schooling, as the ordinary schools lacked sufficient resources to promote the inclusion of children with disabilities:

She’s already ten years old and doesn’t go to school because if she goes to school, there has to be a special teacher for them. Here, there are many children who do not go to school because they have disabilities, so they do not go because the teachers are not specialists. (Mother of a child with a disability 2)

The director told us that if he continued with that [disruptive] behaviour, he would either not pass the grade or he would have to be ... expelled. (Aunt of a child with a disability)

Because he was crying, I took him out of class because there was no one to be with him. Someone had to be with him because the teacher

cannot be dedicated only to him. (Mother of a child with a disability 6)

Another carer spoke of insufficient resources for homeschooling, which was required by her child with a serious medical condition:

I asked the Ministry of Education ... to see if they could follow up with my son at home because of a recent operation he had. The child could not move since the last surgery left him with many side effects. So far, six months have passed, and I have not received any answer, so the child doesn't receive any help. (Mother of a child with a disability 3)

Many caregivers spoke of the important role of community-based organizations in providing families with education, guidance, and advocacy, for example, making sure their children receive proper medical care. Some caregivers also saw them as an important site for social networking, providing a venue for families to share information and resources among themselves:

We used to meet together, up to fifty parents, for example. We all cooperated. We made meals for all of us. We did family exchanges and provided feedback on experiences. If we had to cry, we cried, and we were getting everything out, because more than anything, one has to get everything out. (Mother of a child with a disability 1)

One would tell the experience, and then the other would say, "And how did you get out of it?" For example, mothers whose children were seriously ill.... Like alcoholics anonymous, these are experiences that enrich a person, so that's what [the specific community organization] is about, sharing among all parents, even with the children. (Mother of a child with a disability 1)

In addition, these organizations were often cited as promoters of broader social awareness that, in the long run, facilitated social inclusion of people with disabilities and the people who cared for them:

Initially, there were many people who, due to ignorance of my son's case, let's say that they were astonished, but that has changed over the years because [specific community organizations] have done a lot of work to raise awareness.... Let's say that the veil has fallen from the eyes of the population, and they are more aware of the situation of these special children. (Father of a child with a disability)

Conclusions

The respondents' life testimonies describe the needs of caregivers of children with disabilities in the Las Segovias region of Nicaragua, which are confirmed by the experiences of service sector professionals tasked with supporting this care. The perspectives of the two categories of people interviewed, families and professionals, offer different but complementary readings of the factors contributing to the difficulties faced by these families. The families' needs are multidimensional, and their main concerns are related to the home and family, healthcare, educational approaches to disability, and social and community services. The healthcare system does not cover basic needs, and public services do not provide support to entities working with children with disabilities. Resources usually come from informal social networks consisting of people who do not necessarily have appropriate specialization and training, a situation that may negatively affect children's health, rehabilitation, education, and social inclusion.

The main results show that having children with disabilities can be a social stigma. In rural environments, the mother's migration and poverty are mutually reinforcing factors that promote social exclusion. In addition, women lack basic information about the care needed for children with disabilities. Informal nets are strong, but scarce resources diminish their capacity to make a positive impact on children's quality of life. Most of the caregivers who shared their experiences with us are grandmothers who care for children during their mothers' absence, necessitated by migration. However, the physical condition of these aging women can hinder wellbeing, since children with disabilities often have severe special needs of mobility and comprehensive care needs, which sometimes can be difficult to fulfill. It is important to keep in mind that disabilities originating during childhood can be chronic and have complex conditions, which may extend throughout the lifespan, placing a heavy, long-term burden on caregivers.

The testimonies gathered from families and professionals reveal how a triple stigmatization operates in the organization of care for children with disabilities. On the one hand, mothers are blamed and stigmatized as primarily responsible for or even the cause of their children's disabilities. On the other hand, the dual role of migrant mothers as economic providers and long-distance caregivers is questioned. Families feel ashamed to turn to social and community organizations for support in situations of disability. This combination makes it extremely difficult to meet the needs of these children.

In Nicaragua, a country with a relatively weak publicly funded support network, the main sources of assistance and guidance come from NGOs and isolated actions of informal social leaders and volunteers. Migration reinforces the role of the mother as an economic resource provider and creates an

economic and social burden for mothers, children, and caregivers. Within this complex network of special needs, economic hardship, and transnational families, one of the main objectives of this project was to create a series of informative guides to help potential migrants, families, and professionals make informed decisions and find the support available, all of which are freely available.² The challenge, particularly given the changing political context in Nicaragua, which forced our partner organization (ILLS) to close down, is to disseminate this information in a comprehensible format to those who can benefit from it.

Endnotes

1. In 2018, one US dollar was equivalent to between thirty-one and thirty-two Nicaraguan cordobas.
2. Three separate guides (for migrant mothers, caregivers, and professionals) are available at <https://ruc.udc.es/dspace/handle/2183/31035>

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Notes on Contributors

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Editorial Board

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Sheila Martel's work has been published in *The Riverdale Press*, *Nexus*, *Connections Literary Magazine*, Demeter Press's book of essays on mothering at midlife, and Rehoboth Beach Writers Guild's poetry chapbook. She was awarded a writing retreat at Norcroft. Sheila has participated in many poetry open mics, sharing her original work. She wrote and produced *Sketches of Motherhood* at Mercury Café. A former educator, she holds a master's degree in liberal studies, an advanced certificate in education, and a certificate in spiritual guidance. Sheila grew up in Nova Scotia and Montreal and currently lives in Maryland.

Lenore D. Maybaum is a professor of English at William Penn University, where she teaches classes in grant writing, creative nonfiction, and genre studies. She earned her PhD at the University of Iowa in language, literacy, and culture and later completed an MFA in creative writing at Cornell College. Her publications focus on motherhood and grief. She is currently at work on a collection of lyric essays that take up the question: "What happens when a loss goes unmourned?"

Ariel Moy is a teacher, doctoral supervisor, and arts-based researcher at The MIECAT Institute in Naarm/Melbourne, Australia. She has a private arts therapeutic practice specializing in mother-child relationships and has published, presented, and facilitated workshops nationally and internationally on arts-based research and the mother-child "us." Emerging from her doctoral research, the "us" is a term generative, strange, and precious. It speaks to becoming more than mother and child and to a relational ontology made real in everyday intimate mother-child encounters.

Favour Esinam Normeshie is a feminist scholar and qualitative researcher whose work examines the intersections of motherhood, technology, and care within neoliberal and intersectional frameworks. She holds a PhD in rhetoric, theory, and culture from Michigan Technological University, where her dissertation analyzed how breast pumps mediate maternal labour, subjectivity, and caregiving. Her research engages feminist technoscience, digital health, and maternal wellbeing, with emphasis on structural inequality and policy

change. Drawing on ethnography, autoethnography, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), and participatory design, she has conducted community-based research in Ghana and the United States. She is committed to decolonial, care-centred scholarship and justice-oriented maternal health advocacy.

Antía Pérez-Caramés is a senior lecturer in sociology at the University of A Coruña. She is a member of the research team in migration studies, ESOMI, and at the Centre for Gender and Feminist Studies. She has specialized in the intersection of migration studies with feminist and gender studies. She is currently leading a research project on the impact of crises on the living conditions of essential migrant workers in Spain. She is also involved in two research projects with the Cape Verdean migrant women's community.

Deepshikha Ray is a professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Calcutta, with a specialization in experimental studies within social, clinical and positive psychology. Ray's research interests include schizophrenia, autism spectrum disorders, trauma, gender studies, and social cognition. She has led and collaborated on several significant research projects funded by such organizations as the University Grants Commission (UGC), Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), and the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY). Her professional affiliations include serving as a reviewer for such journals as the *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, *Sage Open*, and the *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*.

Verónica Robles García is an associate professor at the Faculty of Physiotherapy. From 2017, she has been the main investigator of DISEMINAR project, funded by Xunta de Galicia (Spain), a program which consists of addressing the issue of childhood disabilities in Nicaragua and motherhood, working in a multidimensional team of investigators within the education, social and health fields. She is a member of the research team, Neuroscience and Motor Control (NEUROcom) and is involved in research projects related to the healthcare of children with disabilities and their families.

Tanaya Roy Chowdhury is a research scholar at the Department of Psychology, University of Calcutta. Her academic foundation comprises an MSc in psychology and an MPhil in psychiatric social work. She is currently associated with the District Mental Health Program, West Bengal, and is engaged in various community-based mental health initiatives, addressing psychological needs at the grassroots level. Her research interests particularly focus on cultural and sociopolitical contexts and the psychology of ethnic groups. Her research is not only an academic inquiry but also a reflection, a resistance, and a reclamation of the multifaceted realities of being a mother in contemporary Kolkata.

Usua García Sagüés is a Spanish-British artist based in London, currently studying textiles at the Royal College of Art (RCA). Her practice explores an alternative motherhood story through textile sculpture with collections, including *Mother Earth*, *Mother Interrupted*, and *Mother-Infant*. Her main materials are yarn, fibres, copper, aluminum wire, and recycled fabrics. Her tools are a domestic knitting machine, a rigid-heddle loom, a sewing machine, crochet hooks, and needles. Current shows include *House of Haberdash* at the Torriano Meeting House. She curated a twelve-artist exhibition this year on motherhood and has participated in *Textile Landscapes*, *TEKHNE*, and *draw_a_line* gender violence installations at the RCA, *Veridical* at LumiNoir Art Gallery, *je m'amuse SOLO* at RuptureXIBIT, *Murmuration* at J/M Gallery, and *Artnumber23* in Prague. She also has a biochemistry BA from Corpus Christi, Oxford and a previous career in pharmaceutical investing. You can follow her at <https://usoasculptedtextiles.com> and on Instagram @usoa_textileartist

Verónica Verdía Varela has a degree in sociology and a PhD in social science from the University of A Coruña, where she is a member of the research group ECIGAL (Global Citizenship Education, <https://www.ecigal.gal/en>). She has worked in a variety of nonprofit organizations specialized in the field of migration, education for global citizenship, mental health, and social and labour inclusion of people in vulnerable situations. She is currently working as a project technician with the Asociación Parkinson Galicia-Coruña.

Kyla Whetham is a second-year PhD student in the Cinema and Media Studies Program at York University. She is also an alumnus of the University of Ottawa Theatre Theory and Dramaturgy Program and the University of Toronto Cinema Studies Program. Whetham's doctoral dissertation will explore representations of motherhood in Canadian cinema. Beyond her research, she regularly works in community and regional theatre, both on stage and behind the scenes. When not writing about film or putting on theatre productions, she spends her time walking through Toronto's neighbourhoods and taking far too many videos of her cat.

Emily Wolfinger is an associate lecturer in the School of Social Sciences at Western Sydney University, Australia, and the sole mother of three children. She completed a government-funded PhD in sociology under COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020. Emily's research examines institutional and public discourses on sole mothers and critiques the undervaluation of caregiving in late-stage capitalist societies. Current projects include an international collection on policies and practices that enable the work of caregiving.

Margaret T. Wood is a doctoral student at the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Arizona State University. Her research primarily investigates the gendered dimensions of the criminal justice system, with a particular emphasis on reproductive health, maternal incarceration, and the intersection of criminological theory and women's lived experiences. Her work seeks to address longstanding gaps in research concerning justice-involved women and to inform evidence-based policy reforms that promote health equity, family preservation, and successful community reintegration. Through her scholarship, she aims to advance a more nuanced understanding of women's pathways through the justice system and their unique needs.



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